

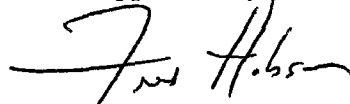
MAVERICKS OF RELIGION: THE IRISH OUTLIERS OF SOUTHERN LITERATURE

by
Bryan Albin Giemza

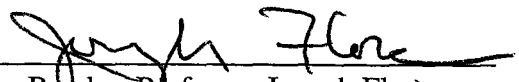
A dissertation submitted to the faculty of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Department of English.

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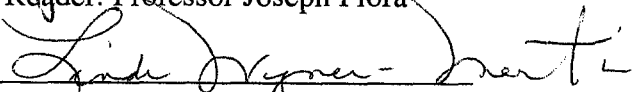
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ABSTRACT

BRYAN ALBIN GIEMZA: Mavericks of Religion: The Irish Outliers of Southern Literature (Under the direction of Fred Hobson.)

This study provides a literary, biographical, and historical examination of the first one hundred years of writing (1815-1915) produced by Irish Catholic writers of the American South. It argues that these outliers of the South, though few in number, were unusually perceptive southwatchers who shaped widespread perception of the region. It offers a sociological explanation for their influence and acuity. It further observes that these writers were mavericks of religion: marked indelibly by their minority faith, and caught between the claims of southern conformity, Catholic conservatism, and their rebellious critical/artistic impulses. Thus it examines the ways in which the writers' worldviews were shaped by the multiplex of Irish, Catholic, and southern identities. It further considers the congruencies and differences between Catholic and southern ideologies.

The principals of the study are Father Abram Ryan, Joel Chandler Harris, and Lafcadio Hearn. The study concludes with a look ahead to Modern writers and beyond, bridging from Kate O'Flaherty Chopin's forward-looking contributions to a group of acclaimed twentieth century writers, including John Kennedy Toole, Flannery O'Connor, and Cormac McCarthy.

In memory of my grandfather, Dr. John Andreas Kearney.

Laudemus viros gloriosos et parentes nostros in generatione sua.

In esteem for the living; in reverence for the dead.

A.M.D.G.

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INTRODUCTION

Mavericks of Religion

What one has as a born Catholic is something given and accepted before it is experienced.—
Flannery O'Connor¹

There is probably no region in America whose religious tradition stands more violently
opposed to Roman Catholicism than that of the South.—Robert Brinkmeyer

The Irish have always had a thing for lost causes.—Patrick O'Neill on the southern Irish

* * *

The very first Irish American novel was published not where one might expect, in some gritty center of northern manufactures, but—of all places—in Winchester, Virginia. *The Irish Emigrant, An Historical Tale Founded on Fact* (1817) was signed by an unnamed “Hibernian,” who has subsequently been identified as one Adam Douglass. It was Douglass who registered the book with the Virginia state clerk in Winchester, a town at the throat of the established pathway of Scots-Irish (frequently given as “Scotch-Irish”) immigration that trickled down the Shenandoah Valley. Thus, the inference that Douglass was most likely a Protestant, though we have only his own words in the preface: “An Irishman, he glories in the idea of being so.”

On the other hand, if Douglass was a Protestant, he rather unconventionally chose a Catholic protagonist. Owen M'Dermott of Country Antrim fled the failed Rebellion of 1798. The sectionally ambiguous novel fulminates against the cruelty of British rule. Owen

luxuriates “on the bank of the Majestic Potowmac” and savors the “sweets of freedom” in his new country, in contrast with the “degradation” of “Irish bondage.” The romantic plot of the book is fairly typical: Owen falls in love with his neighbor, Emma Oniall, whose people fought on the side of William of Orange, and whose family’s fortunes rose with the Protestant Ascendancy. This complicated love can only be properly resolved in the sweet land of liberty, in a novel that is clearly a vehicle for propounding a free Ireland agenda. It manages a deft balancing act by giving equal play to both sides of the sectarian divide.

As Charles Fanning observes, Douglass’s windy two-volume work is “no great shakes” of a novel, but “nonetheless valuable for its inaugural position and early presentation of a number of issues, incidents, and character types.”² But it is important in another respect: it points to the longstanding ties between the South, Irish immigrants, and literature. Those ties will come as no surprise, particularly if one considers the Scots-Irish. Nearly every southern writer of note carries some element of their legacy in his or her background.

But every study begins by setting boundaries (unless it is very tiresome indeed!), and this one proposes to limit the field of southern Irish writers by focusing on the Catholic ones. In so doing, I do not wish to perpetuate the religious divisions that have laved Irish history in blood. This is, first and foremost, a pragmatic decision. Southern Irish Catholics are a discrete enough minority to merit independent consideration, and—withstanding cultural common ground shared with the Scots-Irish—a distinct population. Which is by no means to downplay the Protestant, Scots-Irish roots of southern literature, a topic that has been the subject of much more extensive investigation.³ Kevin Kenny submits that “[b]ecause the ‘Scotch-Irish’ ceased to be Irish (in their own estimation as well as that of others) in the early nineteenth century, the story of American Irish thereafter is largely if not exclusively a

Catholic one.” This is how it came to pass that John F. Kennedy, not Andrew Jackson, was regarded as the “first” Irish president. “The exclusion of these so-called ‘Scotch-Irish’ from authentic Irishness,” writes Kenny, “and their consequent inclusion as true Americans”—and southerners—“depended on definitions of national, ethnic and racial identity on both sides of the Atlantic, in which religion predictably occupied a central place.”⁴

This distinction, I hasten to add, is a purely arbitrary one. As the purebred is to the artificial universe of racial typology, so is the Irish Catholic (and Scots-Irish) to the Irish. That is to say, if one looks deeply enough in the family lineage of Irish, both Catholic and Scots-Irish, rare is the soul who comes from an “unadulterated” line. Moreover, it goes without saying, since Catholicism preceded schism in time, *all* Christian Irish were once Irish Catholic (which had always been a unique version of Catholicism). Whether it is seen as strange, pathetic, or predictable, the fact remains that an ideological divide was politically levered into becoming a race-marker—much as ideologues attempted to invent the “southern race” in a hastily conceived attempt to build nationalism *and* an enemy.

Regrettably, Irish nationalists in both America and Ireland have tended to exclude the Protestant Irish from their definition of Irishness, with pernicious results to show for it. Equally provincially, the “Scotch-Irish” came to embrace the term to set themselves apart from their Catholic countrymen, who, just arrived, looked a lot like the wretched refuse from yon teeming shore. In the South, “Scotch-Irish” also served both as a kind of mental partition and term of convenience: Catholic Irish immigrants were to be found in the Northeast, Midwest, and West. The South, the line went, was the natural habitat of the displaced Scotch-Irish, the indomitable carriers of what Ellen Glasgow called a “vein of iron.”

Or so the story has been told. Sectional identity politics worked to expurgate the Catholic side of the southern Irish story. And surely this owes partly to want of crisply drawn categories (or, to put it still more academically, the avoidance of cognitive dissonance): in the overwhelmingly Protestant South, it was simply easier to shrug off the Irish Catholic outliers.⁵ It did not help that they were guilty by association with northern manufactures and the sort of urban ethnic complexities that extended beyond the South's black/white binaries.

Besides, southerners of Scots-Irish extraction necessarily carry an element of Catholicity in their background, which is inconvenient to a conception of a "whole" self. There are quite likely many writers who could have been included in this study, had their families not elected a Scots-Irish (read: Protestant) identity. John Pendleton Kennedy's *Rob of the Bowl, a Legend of St. Inigoe's* (1854) evinces enormous sympathy for the early Catholic settlers of Maryland, yet his family acknowledged none but Anglican roots. And it is widely known that William Gilmore Simms's father was "Irish." But what kind? He immigrated to Charleston, a southern Irish redoubt, before heading to the frontier. Simms claimed that his father was "of Scotch-Irish stock" and modeled a number of characters after him. His freewheeling Irish father was born in Larne, (now Northern) Ireland; where he appears in Simms's fiction he speaks with an Irish brogue, which is more often used to flag Irish Catholic identity than Scots-Irish.⁶ Simms, after all, is a variant of "Semmes," a name with southern Catholic connections. Raphael Semmes, the celebrated admiral of the Confederate Navy, was a cradle Catholic by way of Maryland colonists, and Flannery O'Connor's aunt was married to one of his nephews.

But given the paucity of biographical information, and the fact that no Irish Simms today claims consanguinity with him, perhaps it is best to let the matter rest. Because he was an ambitious man, he may have decided to let the matter alone, too. He certainly would not be the last American writer to deny his Irish Catholic roots. To pick a prominent example, the case of F. Scott Fitzgerald—mother, Irish Catholic, father, shabby-genteel Maryland Catholic stock—is illustrative. (Ernest Hemingway, Theodore Dreiser, Philip Barry, and Eugene O'Neill also drifted away from the Church.)

In any case, this study picks up where the Scots-Irish left off, and takes a look at the new outsiders. Thus when I employ the term “Irish southerners,” Catholic is implicit, though I am well aware of the fact that the vast majority of “southern Irish” are Scots-Irish. Nevertheless, Irish Catholic settlements “have been a scattered minority among white settlers since colonial times.”⁷ They, too, produced a robust, if less extensive, literature. But the South rarely surfaces in any study of Irish American literature. That is because Irish Catholic emigration to the South, the region that George B. Tindall memorably termed “the single biggest WASP nest this side of the Atlantic,” has been historically light, particularly in comparison to other American regions. Catholic Irish Americans in the South are counted anomalous, and scholarly literature scarcely remarks them (with the notable exceptions of Flannery O'Connor and Margaret Mitchell). Those who are skeptical of the claim that Irish Catholic and “Southern” are compatible are well within their rights.

No less an authority than Louis D. Rubin, Jr., told me—drolly—“You’re not supposed to write about Irish Catholics in the South. That’s not Southern.” In Rubin’s time, the authors of *Southern Literary Study: Problems and Possibilities* (1975) were prompted to ask, “Is the introduction of ‘alien’ philosophical concepts into recent southern literature—

O'Connor's Catholicism, Percy's existentialism—indicative of a significant change in the orientation and motivation of southern writing?"

But Irish Catholics have never been wholly "alien" to the South or to southern literature. In my view, Irish Catholic writing is not particularly exceptional in its location of southern literary themes, and far more consistent with the tropes of southern writing than has been considered previously. On the contrary, I think that Irish American writers in the South have helped shape the perception of the region out of all proportion to their small number, and that belief prompted me to survey the work of these Irish outliers of Southern literature. In his groundbreaking study, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877* (2003), David T. Gleeson argues that Irish Catholic emigrants to the South fell out of view because they had achieved more or less complete social integration by the time of Reconstruction—much as the Scots-Irish had done before. Like the Scots-Irish immigrants that preceded them, he affirms that they assimilated fully enough to be considered generically "Southern," rather than Irish.

They were quite visible on their arrival, however, and their Catholicism would become the outward sign of their inward difference. The first chapter of this study sets out sufficient history to explain how the first batch of Irish American writers in the nineteenth century arrived at various points south. The relevant historical time period spans from 1815 to 1915, as far as the subjects of this study are concerned. In other words, the primary focus of this study is the first century of southern Irish writing. Those principals are discussed in chapter-length treatises.

The first of them is devoted to Father Abram Ryan. The chapter is highly biographical because the extant histories of his life are freighted with misinformation and nationalistic cant. Friend to John Mitchel and Jefferson Davis, Catholic Priest and ideologue

of the Lost Cause, he penned the anthem “The Conquered Banner.” Editor, polemicist, sermonizer, and poet, Ryan offers readers a varied sampler of genres. His life typifies the enthusiastic participation of southern Irish in the nation-building stakes of the Confederacy. His work for the Roman Catholic Church and the evangelical Vincentian Order shows the accommodationist nature of southern Catholicism, but Ryan’s most notable achievement was sacralizing the civic religion of the Lost Cause. This chapter also mentions a few of Ryan’s like-minded, southern Irish Catholic contemporaries, including Theodore O’Hara, James Ryder Randall, and Florence O’Connor.

Following Ryan, I will examine the role of Irish identity in the southern racial caste system by investigating the longstanding assumption that Joel Chandler Harris had a putatively Irish father. As it turns out, Harris was probably not of Irish descent, but he did become a Catholic, wrote about southern Irish, and carried with him the persistent sense that he was an outsider. The sources of the confusion over his identity are revealing, and they speak to the subtleties of southern schemes of racial classification, which are plastic enough to be informed by religious belief and social class. This chapter also purposes to set the record straight on Harris’s supposedly Irish roots.

Following Harris, I turn to Lafcadio Hearn, a man of parts whose self-identity was unusually complicated. At various points in his life he could claim Irish, English, Greek, American, and Japanese citizenship. But he especially loved New Orleans, and he fondly regarded his arrival there as a kind of homecoming. *The City That Care Forgot* taught him to utter the right shibboleths of southern society. In this chapter I examine the ways in which New Orleans culture was congruent with Hearn’s sense of identity: polyethnic, reluctantly Catholic, and out-of-step with modernity. In many respects, he styled himself a Bohemian—

irreligious, fascinated by exotic cultures, a spiritual seeker—yet he had an inburnt conservative core that was preconditioned by his Catholic upbringing. In short, I argue that Hearn may have left Catholicism, but it did not leave him. His southern, Irish, and Catholic identities marked him as an outsider with underdog sympathies and contributed to the genius of his work.

Originally, I intended this study to span the entirety of southern Irish production. I soon discovered that I had a gracious plenty in the nineteenth century alone. So I offer instead a brief look ahead to the twentieth century. It was the golden age of southern Irish writing, and it produced such giants as Margaret Mitchell, Flannery O'Connor, John Kennedy Toole, and Cormac McCarthy. In the final chapter, then, Kate Chopin's forward-looking work provides a bridge to the Moderns and beyond.

* * *

An explanation of how the subjects of this study were vetted also serves to set boundaries. How southern, how Irish, and how Catholic need they be?

The answer to all three questions—some might say—is, *not very*. But each category is so important in identity-formation that a small part might color perception, and furthermore, the idea of purity in any category is itself an artifice or chimera of identity construction. Therefore I construe the terms *Irish*, *Catholic*, and *southern* broadly, recognizing that the valence of each would vary according to the writer. Beginning with the southern requirement: The notion that southerners must be hip-deep in native-born generations or else FFV (First Family of Virginia) is one that W.J. Cash famously skewered in *The Mind of the South*. It runs contrary to the immigration pathways of southern history,

and it is, in any event, a mirage of Confederate nationalism. Those who are of this mindset are wont to intone, Just because a cat has kittens in the oven doesn't make them biscuits. One would think that southerners had been in the region since time immemorial—a convenient prerogative.

Southern parochialism adds its own stipulation: Real Southerners must emerge from a southern port to be properly credentialed. What I will call the “touch-base” test is closely related to the widespread Reconstruction-era fear of the carpetbagger. Flannery O'Connor's origins could be imputed on that theory; she was the descendant of displaced Catholic Marylanders gone to Georgia. Antebellum Maryland passes muster in terms of its cultural spine, but ultimately fails the commonly applied political test because, despite pro-secessionist leanings, it did not go Confederate. Clearly, this is not a very straightforward issue. (And of course, Eudora Welty, whose fascination with Ireland carried her to the emerald shores, would get no slack for her transplanted father.) The likes of Cormac McCarthy could be rejected out of hand; if he is southern, it is truly by the grace of God. After all, he had not the good grace to be born on southern soil; his family did not arrive in Knoxville until he was four. His early consciousness might well have been tainted by unsouthern experiences, the frost of the North still clinging to his play-pretty. It is all to the good, because—as critics have noticed—he seems to have remembered every salient feature of the mountain culture in his Knoxville home, from the strange turns of speech to the savage remnants of its honor-code.⁸ His awareness of his family's outsider status surely propelled some of the finest southern, not to mention American, fiction of the twentieth century.

Two of the writers in this study, Abram Ryan and Kate Chopin, were essentially Missourians who migrated farther South. Lafcadio Hearn was born in Greece. Yet there are

strong arguments that each was southern where it counts: in the landscape of the mind.⁹ Jerry Leath Mills waggishly proposes, “No good southern fiction is complete without a dead mule.” The Mule Rule vindicates O’Connor and Hearn, who was rather obsessed with carrion (cf., the dead ruminants in *Chita*). Cormac McCarthy zestfully decapitates a few of them in *The Crossing*.

Passing on to “how Irish”: Charles Fanning excludes Flannery O’Connor from his study because she “[chose] not to consider Irish ethnic themes.” I have no such prerequisite. Irish Catholics were regarded as a white “other” in the South, and on this theory, a single ancestor could help shape a southerner’s identity. One might as well object to the term “African American,” because little of Africa remains. Actually, Flannery O’Connor did have a sense of Irish ethnic awareness, down to the level of appreciating the Jansenist influence in Irish culture. The ethnicity was partly inherent in the pride she took in her Catholicism, and it showed in the way she muted it—by making jokes about the Irish and Irish priests, and broadcasting her southern credentials.

By the time of the twentieth century, the importance of Irish identity was admittedly waning among the southern transplants, especially if one accepts the idea that Irish southerners had met with success in assimilation. For examples, the remnants of Irish identity might be commemorated in the Saint Patrick’s Day parade in Savannah and reduced to symbolic or fetishistic remembrance. But there is an additional reason for lowering the bar, as far as who qualifies for consideration here: the “Irish” and “Catholic” of “Irish Catholic” are, in a sense, inextricable. Catholicism remained the enduring signifier of Irishness long after immigrants had abandoned any sort of self-conscious ethnic identity. In other words, where Irishness drops off, Catholicism picks up. Southernness, it has been

argued, can be seen as a type of ethnicity, and few would deny that Catholicism is, in part, an ethnic identity. Whereas Irish ethnic identity predictably falls off in the course of generations, Catholicity typically persists.

So how Catholic need a writer be? At one extreme is the ultra-Catholic Father Ryan, who authored polemical Catholic tracts and apologetics, editorialized for turning the South into a Catholic state, and aggressed the Protestant ministers who crossed swords with him. At the other is Lafcadio Hearn, who openly repudiated his Catholic education. But the hounds of heaven were pursuing Hearn, too, as he wandered his most unconventional path, and it is no accident that he later professed his great admiration for the Jesuits that he had spurned so often.

I do not require, then, that a Catholic writer be overtly concerned with Catholic themes or theology, nor can I offer a sophisticated theory of my own, where Catholic aesthetics are concerned, for identifying Catholic literature. Ross Labrie and others have carried out that work. Labrie builds on Thomas Merton's claim that for a Christian poet "the whole world and all the incidents of life tend to be sacraments—signs of God, signs of His love working in the world." Labrie affirms the interconnection of the sacred and secular in Catholic thought, and affirms that "the best [religious] writers will be those who test their ideologies against experience, something that Catholic writers, with their incarnational theology and consequent dedication to the world, ought to, in theory at least, be prepared to do."¹⁰

Paul Giles, another commentator who has reflected extensively on what constitutes Catholic writing, sets up a contrast between the essentially Protestant, romantic mainstream of American literature and "a competing antiromantic 'Catholic' tradition": "Protestant

romance dissolves the mundane world into a more lucid spiritual allegory; Catholic realism invests the mundane world itself with sacramental significance.”¹¹ Synthesizing these views of the Catholic literary imagination suggests “a common emphasis on **the concrete** and a faith that the **world itself holds mystery** and a **meaning** that does not have to be imposed by the artists but **is already present**, if only recognized [emphasis added].”¹²

Unraveling this statement leads to a commonsense interpretation and reveals an essential circularity. Catholicism accepts the idea of sacred space, the corporeal, and so on (the concrete) and an external locus of absolute meaning (God) that, being omnipresent, “is already present,” and individually discernible. Moreover, this Christian realism of the “here and now” is part of the Catholic creed; the “Our Father,” in its Catholic version, gives, “For thine is the kingdom and the power and the glory, **now** and forever, amen.” This is a uniquely Catholic conceit: Christ’s reign is already confirmed in His earthly Church. We would expect that Catholic writers, believing in these things, would express them in writing. Consequently, I would as soon acknowledge the utility of such abstractions and dispense with them, save in the subtle case of Lafcadio Hearn, who was quite convinced that mysteries grew in New Orleans’ soil, there to be sacramentally discerned. Hearn, the fallen Catholic, calls for the dissection kit, so that his perspective may be more accurately probed.

Enough about the eligibility of writers. Anyone who wishes to write about Catholic writers must first face the challenge of identifying them. For a church that is reputationally meticulous about record keeping, and charged with no less a task than charging heaven’s earthly roles, the Roman Catholic Church has been remarkably lax in tallying its own writers. The *Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Catholic American Writing* (1989), which professes to be representative rather than comprehensive, is the only general reference to be

published in the space of a generation. Editor Daniel J. Tynan soon realized the immensity of the task before him, and acknowledged, “There aren’t yet enough scholars to evaluate the large resource of unexamined texts.” A bibliographical note appended to the text puts it plainly: “The fecund field of contemporary Catholic American writing has attracted surprisingly little scholarship.”

The field, it seems, has gone to seed. The short-lived *Catholic Authors: Contemporary Biographical Sketches, 1930-1947*, typical of the outdated scholarship, is like a collapsed star. The light has gone out, and the ray that we now perceive will wink away soon enough. If it takes a great deal of restless reinvention merely to maintain place, scholarship is only marginally more utilitarian. What remains are scattered monographs, and the occasional book that draws together some of the faith’s leading lights, such as Paul Elie’s luminous *The Life You Save May be Your Own: An American Pilgrimage* (2003). Since so many Catholic writers are the sharpest critics of the church, it is perhaps unsurprising that they are not recognized. Anne Rice was raised a good Irish Catholic girl in New Orleans. Now who will claim her?

All of which is to say that this study cannot claim to be comprehensive, either, and that there may be many more candidates unknown. Even more cynically, one might say simply, *mutatis mutandis*: knowledge is cheap in this information age, and such writers are adequately catalogued in such well-known secular organs as *The Dictionary of Literary Biography*. But this is simply not so. Surprisingly few biographies of Joel Chandler Harris take note of the fact that he converted to Catholicism before death. The magisterial *Catholic Encyclopedia*, last revised in 1908, duly noted the fact. (Harris, incidentally, meets *Biographical Dictionary of Contemporary Catholic American Writing* criteria for inclusion,

including those “who at some point in their lives—whether at birth, near death, or in between—[were] baptized Catholics.”) Unless a Catholic writer projects his or her religious views, faith identity may well go unnoticed.

This issue is related to another: How are Irish Catholics portrayed by others? The way that non-Irish southern writers depicted the Irish merits only brief consideration, since it is better to let them speak for themselves. The Irish in the South faced the same public relations problems that they did elsewhere in the country, but being fewer in number, they were sometimes greeted with more curiosity. Plays with titles such as “The Irish Ambassador,” “The Irish Heiress,” and “The Irish in China,” drew crowds even in Dixie.¹³ The outsize Irishman found his way into southern literature and became a laughingstock for the developing southwestern humor tradition. Early Irish American writers showed themselves good-humored and often laughed along, as Charles Fanning points out, with their own satirical sallies—until the famine. William Gilmore Simms, mindful of his own Irish roots, made sport with *Paddy McGann, or The Demon of the Stump* (serialized, 1863), giving southern literature the sedulous backwoodsman *par excellence*.

Other southern writers opted for variety and substituted gullible Irish for African Americans as the butt of their capers. Henry Clay Lewis wrote about “Cupping an Irishman” in *Odd Leaves from the Life of a Louisiana Swamp Doctor* (1843). The Irishman, inventively named “Pat,” is badly disappointed when he finds that the alcohol in the country doctor’s cups is not intended for internal use. In the same vein, George Washington Harris’s *Sut Lovingood, Yarns Spun by a “Nat’ral Born Durn’d Fool,” Warped and Wove for Public Wear* (1867), in which, Edmund Wilson says, “all that was lowest in the lowest of the South found expression,” includes a chapter called “A Snake-Bit Irishman,” featuring a man named

Paddy who even “snores in Irish”! The Irishman has not Saint Patrick’s reptile-repulsing immunities, and Sut dupes the credulous (and alcoholic) Paddy into believing he is “snake-bit” by means of a gut-pile and a well-placed thorn. Like much of Harris’s book, the story, soberly considered, is rather disgusting, even if it is a lark. Irish Southerners were willing to have a laugh at their own expense, but they might well have cringed at the Irish laborer stereotype—a nationally known, embarrassing symbol of Irish hardscrabble living.

Black writers also considered the Irish fair game. As between the two groups there was mutual recognition of a shared lowly estate. Thus the writer of a slave narrative could recollect, “It happened that the overseer, who styled himself Jimmie Welch, was born in Ireland. It was no fault of his that he was born an Irishman, but very inconvenient. He had many peculiar characteristics, and the Negroes who have a saying that ‘An Irishman is only a Negro turned inside out’ disliked him almost to the extent of hatred.”¹⁴ In “Uncle Wellington’s Wives,” Charles Chesnutt writes the story of one Wellington Braboy, who abandons his wife and southern life and sneaks off to the greener pastures of the North. His subsequent remarriage to a “buxom” widowed Irish woman—not “brigamy,” as he puts it, because of a legal technicality—sets the comic tone. Mrs. Flanigan “was not a woman of lofty ideals; with her a man was a man—For a’ that an’ a’ that;—and aside from the accident of color, Uncle Wellington was as personable a man as any of her acquaintance.” She is a sharp-tongued “woman of many words” who occasionally eulogizes her dead husband with a litany of abuse; at other times her tongue is loosened by “frequent applications to the bottle.” Chesnutt gives her the usual stage Irish catchphrases—“spalpeen,” “just after,” “bad ’cess,” etc.—and depicts her as coquettish and something of a man-eater, insinuating that she may not be above selling her body. In the end, what’s good for the goose is good for the gander,

and she orchestrates a day off for Uncle Wellington. Whereupon Mrs. Katie Flannigan absquatulates, along with the couples' rental furniture, to parts unknown. The note she leaves behind (curiously written in eye dialect!), explains that "her first husban has turned up unixpected."¹⁵ Wellington is left to swallow his pride and go back to the black woman he left behind, who is clearly a cut above Mrs. Flannigan, concluding a story by an African American that brims with the same set of racial stereotypes applied to his race.

The slatternly servant was a fixture in writings about both Irish and African Americans, and just one example of the uneasy proximity of the two races within the labor scheme, in the South and elsewhere. Noel Ignatiev summarizes:

[t]he Irish who emigrated to America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were fleeing caste oppression and a system of landlordism that made the material conditions of the Irish peasant comparable to those of an American slave....On the rail beds and canals they labored for low wages under dangerous conditions; in the South they were occasionally employed where it did not makes sense to risk the life of a slave. As they came to the cities, they were crowded into districts that became centers of crime, vice and disease.

There they commonly found themselves thrown together with free Negroes. Irish and Afro-Americans fought each other and the police, socialized and occasionally intermarried, and developed a common culture of the lowly. They also both suffered the scorn of those better situated. Along with Jim Crow and Jim Dandy, the drunken, belligerent and foolish Pat and Bridget were stock characters on the early stage. In antebellum America it was speculated that if racial amalgamation was [sic] ever to take place it would begin between these two groups.¹⁶

There were positive affinities between them, too. The Irish, like African Americans, were the South's insider-outsiders, and they sometimes shared outcast sympathies. Frederick Douglass remarks the kindly Irish dock workers in Baltimore who help orient him to his flight in his *Narrative* (1845). One hundred years later in *Black Boy* (1945), Richard Wright remembered an Irish Catholic acquaintance in Memphis. He trusted him because both of them "are hated by white southerners." In some cases, they shared a common argot;

signifying, for instance is a word common to Irish vernacular and African American usage. William Wells Brown demonstrated the pejorative proximity of urban Irish and black dialects in *My Southern Home* (1880), and a welter of contemporary linguistic scholarship concerns the relationship between Southern White Vernacular English (SWVE) and African American Vernacular English. A branch of this debate now extends to the role of Irish influence in black speech.¹⁷

Noel Ignatiev argues that the Irish also contended with the color line and “became white.” In the industrial North, Irish immigrants came to control the political machinery of urban centuries, carving out place and status from within. It is impossible to say when the Irish became white for purposes of southern racial orders; in *Gone with the Wind* (1936), Margaret Mitchell tried to suggest that it happened in the South before the North, but this is somewhat suspect, because she was highly invested in the assertion.¹⁸ Nationally, a signal moment has been suggested in John F. Kennedy’s election. And one sign of this shift in popular feeling was that pseudoscientific (as the cliché goes; “scientific,” apparently, is still reserved for “correct”) theories about racial differences began as early as the 1860s to classify the Irish as members of the “white” race.¹⁹ As in so many arenas, change was slow in coming to the South, where every racial hierarchy proved more enduring, particularly in the aftermath of the Civil War.

Those who wrote about southern Irish writers sometimes introduced their own misconceptions and projected otherness, spreading Celtic mist as they went. For example, according to the 1914 edition of the *Catholic Encyclopedia*, Abram Ryan “inherited from his parents, in its most poetic and religious form, the strange witchery of the Irish temper.” F.V.N. Painter mentioned that he “possessed the quick sensibilities of the Celtic race,” and

“more than the changefulness of the Celtic heart.”²⁰ Similar was written of Theodore O’Hara: “Always inclined to Celtic meditation tinged with sadness, he loved to walk here [the State Cemetery at Frankfort] amid the solitudes to allow his imagination full flight.”²¹ By the turn of the century, Francis Grierson’s popular book *The Irish Temperament* (1901) perpetuated a mystical view of the Irish, as did The Celtic Twilight branch of the Irish literary renaissance (which Joyce twitted as “the Celtic twalette”), and scholarly currents generally. Evidently, Irishness was a melancholy, sentimental affliction. If not gloomy, equally common is the belief that Irish are characteristically uninhibited, gabby folk, natural raconteurs, etc. According to John Kennedy Toole’s recent biographers, “The Irish Tooles were full of Celtic charm”—whatever that may be—“and a great love of storytelling.” Substitute “black” for “Irish,” and the acceptability of the generalization is instantly suspect.

Many canonical New England writers who agitated for recognizing the humanity of African Americans did not extend the same consideration to Irish immigrants. Louisa May Alcott’s *Work* featured a protagonist who was willing to labor with black servants but not the “incapable” Irish ones. Unimpeachably liberal Ralph Waldo Emerson rather illiberally described the Irish as “men deteriorated in size and shape, the nose sunk, the gums ... exposed, with diminished brain and brutal form.”²² After all, if the idea that Irish are savage brutes is centuries old, the more recent notion that they have some special genius and destiny is just as quizzical, though it seems to be gaining ground in the popular imagination.

But as I considered the field of writers eligible for this study, and their commonalities, I was embarrassed to arrive at a stereotype of my own. It was quite possible that, like any other writer, I was mired in my own subjectivity, and, to put it in rather shopworn terms, guilty of projecting my personality on my subjects. Yet it was difficult to

ignore a theme that I saw connecting their lives. The writers of my study seemed, in varying degrees, to grapple with conflicting impulses, urging them simultaneously to strenuous social rebellion and the weaker forms of conformist prostration. On the one hand they took pride in their sense of individuality; on the other, they sometimes proved willing to go to any length to pass southern loyalty tests. It is a theme that no doubt impels many artists. As Robert Brinkmeyer submits, “Rarely have the world’s great artists been in perfect harmony with their age and homeland.” I was not writing to force a conclusion, and that is why I retained some capacity to be surprised by my own findings, and perhaps a shade embarrassed.

Embarrassed, because rebelliousness, in particular, is a trait stereotypically ascribed to Irish people. The idea that Irish are particularly fractious—like another troublesome people, African Americans—has been used to distort and manipulate their image for centuries. But there it was. Father Abram Ryan locked horns with church authority repeatedly, yet felt obliged to vindicate the principle of papal infallibility years ahead of its time. He broke from his own religious order to support the Confederacy, and subsequently attempted to ingratiate himself with the *better class* of southern people. Joel Chandler Harris rivaled Mark Twain in popularity, a status he enjoyed in spite of his purported “Irish” bastardy. As a society man, he admitted that he failed to “draw an impartial picture of Southern civilization, its lights and its shadows,” but he nevertheless audaciously questioned southern social norms in his fiction and journalism. Lafcadio Hearn loathed the phoniness of the “parlor”—the soulless, Americanized imitation of a much richer Latin institution—and yet he yearned desperately to enter the inner circles of New Orleans society from which he was firmly precluded. Kate Chopin has rightly been viewed as an early paragon of feminine nonconformity, yet some of the social cachet she enjoyed came from the way that she

downplayed her Irishness, and played up her Gallic *je nais sais qua*; the Irish did not fare well before her pen.

The theme holds among the later writers, too. Mary Flannery O'Connor embodied audaciousness in her fiction, which expressly called forth a grotesque menagerie of rebels and conformists. In her own life, O'Connor happily groomed her image as a daring, sharp-witted woman, but to some extent she subscribed to the racial orthodoxy, and proclaimed her Southernness rather more loudly than her Irishness.

Recognizing that I am likely to introduce errors of my own, and that not all stereotypes are without some basis in reality, there are a few mistakes that I hope to avoid. Assertions of Irish triumphalism are not just passé, they are condescending. And if one takes an approach based in racial essentialism—for example, the suggestion that Irish writers tended to write a certain way because of the peculiar chemistry of their racial makeup—it opens the floodgate to more limited generalizations. It is one thing to stake out “Irish themes” by connecting them to their cultural mooring; it is quite another to suggest that the Irish and their ilk *think* a certain way (just try telling them that). It is reasonable to imagine that Ireland’s fissured national identity might give rise to a longing for wholeness in her literature, or that a socially-oriented culture favorably disposed to shame-based coercion might develop an extraordinarily well-articulated tradition of satire.

This distinction may grow rather fine at times, but it is an important one. And it leads me to ultimate questions. The great question that an academic enquiry must answer to at some point—and this one is no exception—is, put bluntly, So what?

In many ways, the thing speaks for itself: I am suggesting that we look at a number of writers in a new way, in terms of a religious and ethnic identity that set them apart from

other southerners. But why place any collection of writers in a group? We do so because it helps us to understand them—their politics, religious feelings, the historical currents and crosscurrents through which they moved, and ultimately, begging John Kennedy Toole's pardon, their *worldview*.

Their keenly felt sense of distance heightened their perception of southern norms and deviance. We should not be surprised to find that they “wrote the book,” as the expression goes, on the South. Indeed, the idea that they were positioned to have special insight is borne out by more than anecdotal or theoretical evidence. Sociologist John Shelton Reed has devoted a lifetime to studying how southerners form their identity, and some of his observations are particularly useful for figuring out what made these writers such astute observers of their region:

Those who are somehow marginal to the South seem to be more likely to think about it than those who are more comfortably and unquestionably Southern. This proposition has the paradoxical corollary that the most self-conscious Southerners are often the least typical, men and women whose backgrounds and experiences put them somehow on the edge of the regional group.

One path to marginality is by living outside of the South.

Of course, some who leave the South simply stop being Southerners; for those who don't, however, leaving often turns out to be what has lately come to be called a “consciousness-raising experience....” Southerners who have lived outside the South are more likely than those who haven't to say that they've thought about the South a lot, to say that they often think of themselves as Southerners, to believe that there are important differences between Southerners and other Americans, and to be ready to tell us what those differences are. This shouldn't be surprising. Why think about the South if you've never known anything else?²³

Or, as Robert Penn Warren cleverly put it, a fish doesn't think about the water until it's out of it. Reed illustrates his theory with Eudora Welty—“the Mississippi daughter of a West Virginia mother and Ohio father”—and the twelve southerners who authored *I'll Take*

My Stand. Pursuing this point, Reed observes, “it’s striking how many Southerners who write about the South have come from the edges of the region, from Texas or Arkansas or Tennessee or Kentucky—parts of the South remote from the region’s cultural heartland....” Reed predicts that more southern writers and intellectuals would hail “from the upland South and the Southwest than random selection would predict. Those subregions have always stood in an equivocal relation to The South proper: if growing up there produces Southerners at all, it seems to produce especially thoughtful ones.”²⁴

In a nutshell, Reed’s findings are that regional consciousness is heightened (1) by urban upbringing and residence, (2) by education, (3) by exposure to the national mass media, and (4) by travel and residence outside the South. To show how this operates, I will apply the model to one of my subjects. Abram Ryan’s life began in the cities of Maryland and he grew up in Saint Louis—both parts of the Outer South, in areas constantly called upon to prove their southernness—at the furthest reach of his regional group. Much in keeping with Reed’s model, he was highly educated. He “became urban” by living in Saint Louis and later, by teaching at Niagara University. It may sound strange that a Catholic fringe Southerner would become a darling of Southern Nationalism, yet it is precisely the result that Reed’s model predicts.

The concept may be enlarged to include the greater part of southern Irish Catholic writers. “The Irish experience in the Old South,” writes Irish American historian David Gleeson, “was primarily urban.” All of the writers treated had considerable education, the *sine qua non* of belles letters; most traveled or lived outside the region, and had significant exposure to the mass media—the principals of this study all worked as journalists or wrote for magazines at one time or another. A yearning for acceptance, and simultaneous pride in

their distinctness, is largely to be expected. To some extent, they are all “displaced persons,” as Catholics and Southerners, an embedded minority at a double remove from American cultural hegemony. Even more to the point, distanced from white southern homogeneity yet at home there, they share an outsider’s knack for looking in.

But they also had another layer of regional consciousness because of their minority religion. That discussion, I hope, will be valuable in itself. I would also submit that this study has come of age. Bluford Adams recently remarked a “re-revival” of scholarly interest in Euro-American ethnic groups in *American Literary History*. Contemporary biographers routinely probe the ethnic roots of “well-known Euro-American artists and intellectuals,” and, he claims, the “rise of whiteness studies” “has brought the history of European immigration into the US conversation about race.”²⁵ Partly it owes to changing tastes and an interest in the unexplored corners of biographical annals. Not so long ago the lives of black writers were not regarded as worthy of examination, and the same might be said of many Irish Americans, who only recently whitened in the racial scheme, joining the doubtful league, I suppose, of dead white men. The women lag behind still. Flannery O’Connor was not just one of the first-rank southern writers of the twentieth century; she is internationally recognized as one of the leading *American* writers. Yet it is only in recent years that a complete and proper biographical study has been made of her life.

John Kennedy Toole reportedly chalked “Anti-Catholicism is the anti-Semitism of the American intellectual” on the board for his students. In a chapter titled “Catholic Otherness,” Mark Massa, S.J., writes, “The perception of Roman Catholic faith, practice, and polity as superstitious, corruption, undemocratic, and ‘un-American’ is culturally ubiquitous. It was labeled the ‘deepest bias in the history of the American people’ by political and cultural

historian Arthur Schlesinger Jr....”²⁶ If they are correct, one might expect that Catholic writers have not gotten their due.

But there are signs that this is beginning to change. Scholars now take very seriously the proposition that Shakespeare was a Catholic through-and-through; his “outrageous fortune,” one reading goes, was the regime change that outlawed his family’s faith. A growing body of evidence suggests that Edgar Allan Poe also inclined toward Mother Church.²⁷ The presumption that any discussion of religious affiliation clouds rational academic enquiry has always struck me as slightly perverse, particularly in a time when sexuality has become something of a holy grail to literary critics. If sexuality is the lost codex by which an author’s life might be understood, what can be made of religion? In the past, writers who raised sexual themes found that their sexuality immediately became their most salient quality among critics. But the same analysis might apply to religion: we generally admit an author’s religion only if it was of significant and *visible* import within that author’s opus. Otherwise religious orientation is seen as simply irrelevant.

And just as politics has obscured the importance of sexuality, it has often obfuscated the role of religious orientation in writers’ lives. Canonical prerogatives—issued by those who did the claiming—decided not only who would be admitted, but by what means. But as long Catholicism is regarded as innately anti-intellectual, “the last acceptable prejudice” may continue to operate, and Catholic culture—not just Catholic belief—will remain a lost province of American, and southern, literature.

Though few in number, southern Irish writers matter because they changed the shape of southern literature. It is worth taking one last look at what they shared in common. They were “almost submerged within the dominant Protestant cultures,” in the words of one

critic.²⁸ Each bore the burden of Catholic identity, a charge that in turn complicated southern identity. Darden Pyron speculates that since Margaret Mitchell “could not reject her mother directly, she could reject her mother’s religion.” For guilt-wracked Catholics, the two issues are often related. Rarely do they succeed in jettisoning either. Peggy Mitchell was famously willful and obstinate—two qualities that are often attributed to the Irish—and when her churchgoing brother, who had taken up the yoke of family respectability, urged her back to the fold, she turned him down bluntly. “When you have made a bargain with the devil,” she returned, “you had better stick to your bargain. I may have made one, but whenever I give my word on something, or whenever I take a course of action, I am not going to try to crawl out of that course of action because I may have made a mistake in starting it. It is not the fair thing to do.”²⁹ Explained a friend, “Peggy was a maverick of religion.”

They were the white English-speaking Other, and it nerved them to mount audacious critiques, or else to conform themselves vigorously to southern political standards. Moving from journalism to more creative projects was an accepted, even expected practice in the nineteenth century (as Howells, Twain, and countless others demonstrated), and the southern Irish writers of this study partook of the trend. Each participated in public discourse in the days of personal—very personal—journalism. Even in the age of billygoat-bearded, unreconstructed Rebs, Abram Ryan was a stalwart who brooked no criticism of Confederate motives, in whose service his brother had died as a kind of stand-in. Joel Chandler Harris, whose poor white roots foisted posthumous Irishness upon him, did a good deal more than remember how we never used to be. As an editorialist, he never succumbed to Babbitry, and spoke out boldly against southern clannishness (and Klannishness). And Lafcadio Hearn excoriated bad southern plantation literature, refusing to even run notices for syrupy books.

Each of them kindled a vocation and an avocation. Ryan was a priest who moonlighted as a newspaper editor and poet. Harris worked his way through the ranks of newspapermen before trying his hand at story writing. Hearn was a newspaperman and *bon vivant* who worked his way into fiction, translation, and eventually, the academy. Kate Chopin was necessarily a mother, though certainly no den mother, as well as a first-rate professional who applied herself purposefully to acquiring her art.

They were mostly self-made arrivistes. Ryan's immigrant family migrated from shanty to lace curtain Irish status; his white collar job completed the transformation. Harris, the red-headed bastard, requires no explanation. Hearn came to the country penniless and earned a literary reputation so estimable that he felt comfortable both consorting with and sending up his Irish type. Kate O'Flaherty Chopin's family comfort was won by her workhorse of a father, an Irish immigrant.

Their outsiderism made them born Southwatchers, keenly aware of the ways in which they fit in (conservatism, self-defense, and self-reliance), and the ways in which they were set apart (class stigma and religious identity). Each had a hunger for place and a need to belong to a particularized location. Their conflicting impulses of conformity and rebellion fuelled their need to tell about the South. They wrote with underdog heart. They kept their history; it is not an accident that Catholics have a reputation for keeping the dead alive through their votive administrations, and in this their worldview meshes neatly with southern ancestor-worship. They each exhibited a high degree of racial consciousness. They shared in a sense of social conservatism predicated by Catholic sensibility. They were all mavericks of religion, naturalized rebels of their section, outliers of place, Americans twice-removed.

And they wrote the South.

Notes

- ¹ Quoted in Jean W. Cash, Flannery O' Connor: A Life (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2002) 5.
- ² Charles Fanning, The Irish Voice in America : 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction, 2nd ed. (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2000) 41.
- ³ In deference to the Scottish maxim that "Scotch is a drink; the Scots are a people," I will use "Scots-Irish" in lieu of the perhaps more familiar "Scotch-Irish."
- ⁴ Kevin Kenny, The American Irish: A History (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000) 2-3.
- ⁵ With the pop culture resurgence of interest in all things Irish, it is fascinating to observe what happens when all are lumped in the same pot—a bit like putting huge ornamental plains-Indian headdresses on Cherokees.
- ⁶ John Caldwell Guilds, Simms: A Literary Life (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1992) 4-13.
- ⁷ Farrell O'Gorman, "Irish Catholics." In Joseph M. Flora, Lucinda Hardwick MacKethan and Todd W. Taylor, The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2002) 378-9.
- ⁸ Mike Gibson, "Knoxville Gave Cormac Mccarthy the Raw Material of His Art. And He Gave It Back," Sacred Violence, ed. Wade Hall, and Wallach, Rich (El Paso: Texas Western, 2002) 23-4.
- ⁹ Editor Shannon Ravenel goes by an even more inclusive standard: a southern writer is one who lives in the South.
- ¹⁰ Ross Labrie, The Catholic Imagination in American Literature (Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1997) 18.
- ¹¹ Paul Giles, American Catholic Arts and Fictions: Culture, Ideology and Aesthetics, Cambridge Studies in American Literature and Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) 25, 168.
- ¹² Farrell O'Gorman, "Peculiar Crossroads: Flannery O' Connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction," Dissertation, University of North Carolina, 2000, 132.
- ¹³ David T. Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 105.

- ¹⁴ J. Vance Lewis, Out of the Ditch; a True Story of an Ex-Slave (Houston: Rein & Sons Co., 1910) 16.
- ¹⁵ Charles Waddell Chesnutt and William L. Andrews, Conjure Tales and Stories of the Color Line, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin, 2000) 206-38.
- ¹⁶ Noel Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White (New York: Routledge, 1995) 2.
- ¹⁷ Cf., Guy Bailey, "The Relationship between African American Vernacular English and White Vernaculars in the American South: A Sociocultural History and Some Phonological Evidence." In Sonja L. Lanehart, Sociocultural and Historical Contexts of African American English, Varieties of English around the World, vol. 27 (Philadelphia: John Benjamins Pub. Co., 2001). See also John R. Rickford, "Social Contact and Linguistic Diffusion: Hiberno-English and New World Black English," Language 62.2 (1986).
- ¹⁸ For more on this point, refer to the discussion of Margaret Mitchell and "passing" in the final chapter.
- ¹⁹ Dale T. Knobel, Paddy and the Republic: Ethnicity and Nationality in Antebellum America, 1st ed. (Middletown, Conn.: Wesleyan University Press, 1986).
- ²⁰ F. V. N. Painter, Poets of the South; a Series of Biographical and Critical Studies with Typical Poems, Annotated, Granger Index Reprint Series (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1968) 104-5.
- ²¹ Bertram Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2003) 109.
- ²² Ralph Waldo Emerson, Philip Nicoloff, Robert E. Burkholder and Douglas Emory Wilson, English Traits (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) 195.
- ²³ John Shelton Reed, "Choosing the South," Minding the South (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 277.
- ²⁴ Reed, "Choosing the South."
- ²⁵ Bluford Adams, "Reading the Re-Revival: Competing Approaches in U.S. Ethnic Studies," American Literary History 15.2: 34.
- ²⁶ Mark Stephen Massa, Anti-Catholicism in America : The Last Acceptable Prejudice (New York: Crossroad Pub., 2003) 7.
- ²⁷ Michael L. Burdick's offprint, *Usher's "Forgotten Church"?: Edgar Allan Poe and Nineteenth-Century American Catholicism*, is now available from the E.A. Poe Society of Baltimore. It offers an excellent overview.

²⁸ Farrell O’Gorman, “Irish Catholics.” Flora, MacKethan and Taylor, The Companion to Southern Literature: Themes, Genres, Places, People, Movements, and Motifs.

²⁹ Darden Asbury Pyron, Southern Daughter : The Life of Margaret Mitchell (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991) 463.

CHAPTER I

A Brief History of the Irish Nexus in the American South, Geopolitical and Religious

The Irish in the Old South were not and did not see themselves as victims.—David Gleeson, *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877*

When we went calling on the older generations of relatives, those who had been active in the sixties, I sat on the bony knees of veterans and the fat slippery laps of great aunts and heard them talk about the times when Little Alex [Stephens, later Confederate Vice-President] was visiting them and how much fried chicken Father Ryan could put away and how nice thick wrapping paper felt when put between the skin and the corset in the cold days during the blockade when woolen goods were so scarce.—Margaret Mitchell

I asked why he should employ Irishmen, in preference to doing the work with his own hands. “It’s dangerous work and a negro’s life is too valuable to be risked at it. If a negro dies, it’s a considerable loss, you know.”—Frederick Law Olmsted, *A Journey in the Seaboard Slave States* (1856)

* * *

If one were to take the writers considered in this study and map the vector of their entry to the South, or else tally the “hits” where key events played out, three hot spots would emerge: New Orleans, St. Louis (her sister city), and Baltimore. Each of these cities, at one time, boasted the third largest in population in nineteenth century America (Baltimore was the second largest for a brief time). These locales are arbitrary, insofar as they bind the greatest number of narratives strands belonging to the figures of this study, and they were by no means the only routes by which Irish came to the South. After all, many of the Baltimore Irish called in at New York and Boston first. Charleston and Savannah harbored major

entrepôts and together comprise a crucial fourth center. (Underscoring the point is the fact that the Savannah nexus captures the *terra familiaris* important to Flannery O'Connor, Grand Dame of southern Irish writing.) Indeed, middle Georgia, as it happens, plays a role in the story as well. It is simply a matter of happenstance that these other areas are not as relevant to capturing the movements of the principal writers of this study.

But before tracing their lives within that geographical nexus and releasing our historical actors, we will need to set the historical limits. In one sense, this is a straightforward matter. Historians know very little about Irish Catholic immigration before the nineteenth century. The estimates vary widely, but as many as 100,000 Irish Catholics came to the colonies in the eighteenth century—only to be “lost,” to both history and their families. Many of them were fully indentured, their passage incidental to their bondage; many others soldiered for England. They certainly faced “poverty, bond service and the recruiting agent” upon arrival, and gave up more than their Irish language as they acculturated.¹ Catholicism was as impracticable in the colonies as in England, save in Maryland and scattered settlements, so these émigrés could either become irreligious or take such consolation as Protestantism offered. The loss of those generations left deep scars in Ireland’s collective memory. As Gleeson observes, “nineteenth-century Irish clerics who came to the South determined not to let contemporary immigrants go the way of their eighteenth-century predecessors.”² Like many rural countries, Ireland’s family memories run deep, and they grieved achingly for those who went to America, never to be heard from again.

Some of them undoubtedly wanted anonymity. British rule looked with favor on indenture, and courts cheerfully clapped undesirables of all kinds into service. Contemporary

papers frequently carried notices for runaway Irish indentured servants, since “the Irish had the reputation for being the servants most likely to flee,” according to one historian. Some of them melted into Appalachian coves. Given the primitive condition of the Catholic Church in their new country, keeping the faith posed a serious challenge. No doubt many of them put Catholicism behind them in exchange for a low profile.

The Congregationalist Church held New England and the Anglican Church officially held sway in the South while a variety of democratic sects prevailed in the backcountry. Harsh penal laws armored the span of the seaboard from the influences of Popery. British troops, abetted by zealous New Englanders, drove Catholic French settlers clear across the continent, dispersing Acadians in a broad swath. *Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia: Leaves of Its History* (1879) gives a flavor of the reception Irish Catholics met in the South. “The history of the Church, after the descent of the Holy Ghost, begins with the preaching of two Apostles, with stripes on their backs,” wrote J.J. O’Connell, an Irish-born priest dispatched to the South. “[I]t begins in Charleston with two Catholics, clad in garments equally ignominious, and scarcely less painful. *In the year 1775, two Catholic Irishmen were tarred and feathered*, charged with the doubtful crime of tampering with Negroes [his emphasis].” O’Connell takes pains to impress upon the reader the pains of these pilgrims’ progress: “The above is the first item in the history of Catholicity in the Carolinas, and will serve as a text for succeeding chapters to the close of the civil war; the act was significant, and the prophecy of her future life. The first Catholics were some poor Irish immigrants or redemptionists, a name by which they were called, who were unable to pay for their passage; they were apprenticed on their arrival to the planters, who reimbursed the captain for the expense of their transportation.”³ Their names were lost to the annals, even O’Connell’s.

The eighteenth century is largely a historical void, so the principal events of this study span the nineteenth century. Conveniently enough, a watershed moment, the failed 1798 Irish rebellion, fell at century's end. Somewhat less conveniently, the great period of Irish Catholic immigration—the most familiar one—did not begin until 1815; hence, David T. Gleeson's extremely useful history is titled *The Irish in the South, 1815-1877*. And the history of Irish American literature begins, for all practical purposes, in 1817, with the publication of Adam Douglass's *The Irish Emigrant*.

If 1815 is an off-the-shelf start date, when should the study end? A number of factors nudge the period of focus forward. Three of the writers considered in the main portion of this study breasted the twentieth century—Kate Chopin (d. 1904), Lafcadio Hearn (also d. 1904), and Joel Chandler Harris (d. 1908). Historical epochs and movements do not come in tidy, century-long parcels, so the business of setting bookends among the annals is a pardonably messy one. The first one hundred years of Irish Catholic southern writing, roughly 1815-1915, is the one that I will survey. The year 1915 also makes a prominent marker because it was the year that the second incarnation of the Ku Klux Klan was born. In an early instance of the cinematic copycat phenomenon (Griffith had just come out with *Birth of a Nation*), William Simmons, who called himself “Colonel” based on his rank within the Mason-like Woodmen of the World, led his infamous march up Stone Mountain and solemnly set a cross on fire. The newly incarnated Klan quickly underwent a breathtaking expansion and aspired both to covert political power and overt new legitimacy. For the first time, an anti-Catholic position became a tenet of the Klan mission, changing again the special meaning of Catholic identity in the South. These were also the years of Tom Watson's anti-Catholic, anti-Semitic, and Negrophobic demagoguery in Georgia.

But this, too, is an arbitrary terminus. The period of Irish visibility in the South, David Gleeson argues, ends with Reconstruction. By that point, Irish southerners had proven their solid South mettle and ended the transformation from “stranger” to “southerner.” Afterwards, “they continued to retain aspects of their Irishness, principally their Catholic faith, but did not see this continued ethnic identity as a detriment to their acceptance in southern society.”⁴

With that, the stage is set. And Maryland, a place of first settlement, gives a point of historical departure.

* * *

The first anchor-point of this history is Baltimore. Understanding what drew Anglo- and Irish Catholics to Maryland requires a glance at an even deeper past. From the beginning of New World settlement schemes, some crown agents had hoped that the colonies might be a good dumping ground for recusant Catholics. Sir Humphrey Gilbert and Sir George Peckham formulated plans for a Catholic colony in the new world, and found an unlikely ally in Elizabeth’s Sir Francis Walshingham, who backed them because, “[i]f the Catholics could be induced to migrate, they might be converted from potential rebels in England to loyal subject in English colonies.” They sought backing from Richard Hakluyt, a colonization propagandist. Hakluyt played a minor role in the planning, but elsewhere he fulminated against Catholics, fretting that American Catholics might join forces with the Spanish, much as Irish rebels had done before. Unreconstructed Catholics posed a fifth column problem for Elizabeth’s characteristically paranoid reign.

The idea of shipping off papists the way that convicts were later sent to Australia never really caught fire, but it is particularly interesting that the fear of another Irish rebellion may have scuttled the resettlement scheme. New England Puritans could practice their faith without persecution but whether they would extend the courtesy to others was an unsettled question. In 1628 the first Lord Baltimore, George Calvert, found that his Catholic settlers were about as well received as a New York trash barge. The first Catholic “pilgrims” disembarked at Newfoundland, where, in Calvert’s rosy vision, they would coexist with Protestants and Anglicans. As it happened, the mutually suspicious Protestant and Catholic colonists had different plans. After a disastrous winter, Lord Baltimore and his Catholic pilgrims called in to Virginia, where the governor promptly turned them away. Settlement finally “took” in freshly granted Maryland. Contrary to popular belief, Maryland was not a pro-Catholic colony; it merely took the unprecedented step of abstaining from endorsing a state religion, and thus made a clean and largely unprecedented break from the ancient doctrine of *cujus regio ejus religio* (the religion of the king is that of the people). Consequently, Maryland was the only colony suitable for Catholic colonization, and settlement there was mixed from the beginning.

William Byrd supplies his *History of the Dividing Line* with a loyalist perspective on the Catholic exodus to Maryland. He makes euphemistic reference to the “rigour of the government” in Catholic persecution:

But what wounded Virginia deepest was the cutting off Maryland from it, by charter from king Charles I to sir George Calvert, afterwards lord Baltimore, bearing date the 20th of June, 1632. The truth of it is, it begat much speculation in those days, how it came about that a good protestant king should bestow so bountiful a grant upon a zealous Roman catholic. But it is probable it was one fatal instance amongst many other of his majesty's complaisance to the queen.

However that happened, it is certain this province afterwards proved a commodious retreat for persons of that communion. The memory of the gunpowder treason-plot was still fresh in every body's [sic] mind, and made England too hot for papists to live in, without danger of being burnt with the pope, every 5th of November;⁵ for which reason legions of them transplanted themselves to Maryland in order to be safe, as well from the insolence of the populace as the rigour of the government.⁶

As it turned out, even this tenuous beachhead of religious toleration was soon washed away.

The "Glorious Revolution" of 1688-1689 brought violent change. The Calverts were again unhorsed, and Catholics found themselves under the same Penal Laws which had caused them to flee England. Always a minority, the Catholics were now powerless: unable to vote, to worship publicly, to hold public office. They were taxed to support the Anglican clergy, fined for sending their children abroad to be educated in Catholic schools, and forbidden to inherit property unless they swore the oath of allegiance to the King as head of the Church of England. Catholic priests were virtually barred from the colony under the threat of life imprisonment.⁷

In theory, Catholics were kept under tight controls. In practice, the severest rules were fairly laxly enforced. Still, they bridled, and gradually, they were abolished. One can imagine the reaction of Irish and Anglo-Catholic immigrants, some of whom emigrated to cast off penal laws, only to find a fresh set of them reinstated in the colonies. One of these was a man from Ireland named Charles Carroll, who was at least allowed to own property in Mary's Land. The Carroll family must have believed, as the Good Book says, that a good name is worth more than riches. Charles Carroll (the Settler) begat...Charles Carroll (of Annapolis). When a double tax on Catholic property was instituted, he appealed for the "restoration of Catholic rights."⁸ He also privately considered moving to Louisiana.

This Charles Carroll of Annapolis in turn begat another Charles, Charles Carroll of Carrollton, whose name says something about the family's increasing fortune in the New World. Following in his father's footsteps, Charles of Carrollton petitioned the legislature.

He introduced an unsuccessful bill to the Maryland senate for the gradual abolition of slavery. More bodies meant a larger land grant in the newly formed fiefdom of Maryland, so indentured servants arrived with the first Jesuit settlement, and the Jesuits found themselves in the unlikely business of promoting slave importation.⁹ But the principled Carroll family found a toehold for their faith, with its imperfections, and they clove to their land—at least, for some generations. The remains of the first two patriarchs are presently interred somewhere beneath a mall in Parole, Maryland, an unhappy location for believers in resurrection of the body.¹⁰

The family also produced the country's first full-blooded Catholic patriot. The Revolutionary war was enthusiastically supported by Catholics who were well familiar with taxation without representation. As a signatory to the Declaration of Independence, the third Charles Carroll reinvented the public role of Catholics.¹¹ His loyalties were unimpeachable and helped to soften Puritan suspicion about Catholic intentions. His cousin, John Carroll, was also born to an Irish father, sent overseas for Jesuit education, and supported the Revolution. John Carroll accompanied Benjamin Franklin on a 1776 junket to entreat Canadian neutrality during the Revolution. Carroll was well regarded among the Federalists, and he was just the right man for the moment. He was appointed the first American bishop in 1789 and seated at Baltimore. Estimates put the number of Catholics at the time as low as 25,000 and as high as 35,000, "over half of whom lived in the South."¹²

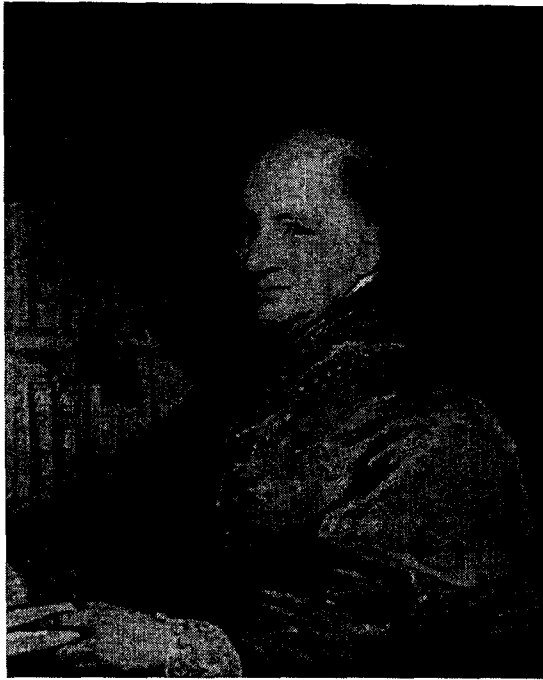


Illustration 1. John Carroll, the first American bishop.

Carroll was truly a child of the spirit of '76, and some of the reforms he espoused—including the vernacular mass and increased lay involvement—languished until Vatican II. Political unrest in Europe and the suppression of the Jesuits had isolated the Americans, for a time, from their church superiors, and it seemed that a democratic model might take root. Four revolutionary principles—"the sovereignty of the people, popular elections, religious freedom, and a written constitution"—underpinned the American Catholic community and its system of lay trustee election.¹³ French revolutionary ideals also worked to foment Irish rebellion and change the political framework of the religious culture in Ireland.¹⁴

Carroll had ushered in the experimental "republican" era in American Catholic history, characterized by "enlightment ideals" and a "democratic ethos."¹⁵ There is not space enough to canvass the history here, but suffice it to say that for a time John England's philosophy seemed to be winning out over more traditional schools. It was good while it lasted, but Rome smelled insubordination in the breezy American approach to the faith, and

Rome was not amused. In the end, Ultramontanism triumphed unequivocally with the 1829 convocation of American bishops in Baltimore. They divested trustees of church holdings and handed them to the episcopate (despite the fact that in true American spirit, many lay people had privately “raised” their churches), moved to abolish the election of lay trustees, and signaled the need for the “Romanization” of the church.

By 1830, the brief American experiment in Catholicism had been whisked into history’s dustbin, and the democratization of the American Church was officially over. Diocesan shake-ups and reappointments had already proven effective in consolidating papal authority. In the years to come, the Church would stock the clergy from the authoritarian ranks of the Irish religious.

Authoritarian, because they were conservative; conservative, because they were Irish. Irish Catholicism was undergoing a conservative swing. Flannery O’Connor remarked the roots of it when she wrote, “I like Pascal but I don’t think the Jansenist influence is healthy in the Church. The Irish are notably infected with it because all the Jansenist priests were chased out of France at the time of the Revolution and ended up in Ireland. It was a bad day if you ask me.” Of Irish Catholicism she opines, “Apparently someone had suggested that there wasn’t enough sin in Ireland to supply the need. O’Faillon [sic; Seán O’Fáolain] said no, the Irish sinned constantly but with no great emotion except fear. Jansenism doesn’t seem to breed so much a love of God as a love of asceticism.”¹⁶

It is difficult to calculate what portion of stereotypical Catholic guilt these Irish priests brought to the American strain of their faith, but their legacy is well known in the familiar American figure of the clucking, Irish-accented priest. So ubiquitous were the Irish appointees that “for years the ‘American’ parish was called the ‘Irish’ parish—an indication

of the persistent domination of the Irish in mainstream Catholic life.”¹⁷ (To this day, some Louisianans refer to “FBI” parishes: those tended by “foreign-born Irish.”) They also came to dominate southern catholic life, reinforced by a contingent of French and German religious.

With the accession of authoritarian Irish clergy, the Catholic Church in America was sounding a tone of newfound confidence that verged on audaciousness. Gone were the days of Francis Parker, a Jesuit who requested assignment at the new mission in Maryland, with the timid admission that he “would not fare well in controversy with heretics having yett read but little in that kynde.”¹⁸ The tone had changed drastically.

Maybe the founders had seen the writing on the wall, to use a biblical phrase. An alarmed John Adams had written Thomas Jefferson in 1812, “I do not like the reappearance of the Jesuits.... Shall we not have regular swarms of them here, in as many disguises as only a king of the gipsies can assume, dressed as printers, publishers, writers and schoolmasters?” He did not mince words. “If ever there was a body of men who merited damnation on earth and in Hell, it is this society of Loyola’s. Nevertheless, we are compelled by our system of religious toleration to offer them an asylum.”¹⁹ Jefferson assumed that this, too, would pass, and as late as 1822, trusted that “there is not a Young Man now living in the United States who will not die a Unitarian.”²⁰ Fundamentalists counted Jefferson as the very Antichrist, and this was one of the few issues where they found common cause with American Catholics.

Jefferson notwithstanding, the Catholics were coming. Some of the priests dispatched to America were indeed “problem priests,” whose rough character met the continent on its terms, but many were the top-shelf variety, exquisitely trained by their

religious orders, and equal to their best-educated protestant counterparts. These Catholic polymaths soon learned that education provided their most formidable tool for carving out a place in American society. It is no accident that Catholic schools were frequently targeted in outbursts of Nativist violence of the kind that razed the Charlestown convent; many savvy Protestants recognized the excellence of Catholic schools and chose them for their own children.

It is also no wonder that the first echelon of southern Catholic Irish writers came from the cloth. They comprised the major part of the educated classes of Irish immigrants. Their profession, to varying degrees, required letters, and its contemplative nature supplied the writer's *sine-qua-non*: time to write. Simply put, they had the time and the inclination. They also had an agenda, and like many first-generation immigrants, they laid exaggerated, even ridiculous, emphasis on their patriotism. There were two countries to claim their loyalties—the South and America—and three if one counts what has been called their “hunger for home.” Few of the southern Irish would return, though.

And they were a sharp-tongued lot. Their world was unquestioningly binary. It was inhabited by Catholics, and by Heretics (with the odd Heathen now and again, mainly unproselytized slaves). Father Jeremiah Joseph O’Connell’s observations in *Catholicity in the Carolinas* range from the vitriolic (he hated Sherman unabashedly), to the compassionate (he led the Ursuline nuns away from the smoldering remains of their Columbia convent, a fresh Sherman monument), to the hilariously opinionated. In a capsule summary of American history, he begins, “America, called GREAT IRELAND, was discovered by St. Brendan in the sixth century.” Later, observing the various sects: “There are Methodist settlements, which are the most liberal, and Presbyterian, and Baptists,” O’Connell wrote

gruffly. “The latter is the prevailing sect in all this region, for no reason that I could ascertain beyond the abundance of its waters.”²¹

By 1800, the American Catholic Church was, as historian Kevin Kenny puts it, “small, genteel, and conservative,” “dominated by Englishmen and Frenchmen,” and based “mainly in the South, especially Maryland.”²² Historian Raymond Schmandt writes of that time, “The South as a whole was originally the dominant element in the American Church. Until the 1830s and 1840s, the majority of the bishops lived below the Mason-Dixon line, including the American primate, the Archbishop....”²³ Immigration patterns would shift Catholicism’s demographic center solidly to the North by the mid-nineteenth century, but the fact remains that the Church initially looked to the South as the seat of American Catholicism.

Before I sketch the religious culture of the South at the time, it would be well to regroup for a moment and remember where the history rests. The Carroll dynasty, the early American Catholic Church, and the storied Anglo-Irish-Catholic settlement of Maryland all serve to situate Baltimore, the first capital of this short historical exodus.

The prejudices of a latter day, Bible-belt view of the South infect our basic understanding of its religious temperament, which was of a comparatively meek character in the antebellum South. One could certainly scrutinize the use of religion in controlling slaves, or the way it enacted hierarchy in a publicly visible forum.²⁴ Nevertheless, church was a Sunday matter, and white southerners had other less pious matters to tend to, not the least of which was making money from a very lucrative plantation economy. Indeed, many early missionaries groused about the southern preference for sporting pastimes over “getting religion.” Regardless of the current climate, the southern approach to antebellum religion

justified the region's reputation for being laid back—or simply indifferent. James Henry Hammond archly pointed out as much. In his infamous *Letter to an English Abolitionist*, he reckoned it “a mark of our want of excitability—though that is a quality accredited to us in eminent degree—that few of the remarkable religious *Isms* have taken root among us.”²⁵

Likewise, the more virulent Nativist movements of New England, with their agenda of Catholic suppression (or in other words, *Nativism*), found their bootless efforts in the South mostly unprofitable. Thus Irish Catholics met with a surprising degree of religious toleration in many parts of the South, where a live-and-let-live attitude contrasted with New Englanders' insistence on body-and-soul zeal. Christine Hyerman's *Southern Cross* puts forward a strong case that “Evangelism came late to the American South,” and that it arrived “as an exotic import rather than an indigenous phenomenon.”²⁶ Perhaps 10 percent of southern church attendees were evangelical in 1776; by the war of 1812, evangelical sects still counted less than 20 percent of overall church membership. As Hal Crowther wryly submits, “it took more than a century of struggle, and ample ridicule, before [they] gained the dominance [H.L.] Mencken deplored.”²⁷

The sort of mild-mannered southern religion that disdained immoderation received a serious blow during the Civil War. There is nothing quite so unsettling as a radical disconfirmation of Godly sanction to send people back to the temple for answers. Nevertheless, religious tolerance streamlined Irish Catholics' assimilation in southern society, and may help explain why, in David Gleeson's thesis, the Irish had “disappeared” into the cultural fabric by the end of Reconstruction. Ironically, the lot of the savage South was secured by the brutality of Reconstruction, as paranoid southerners took on the intolerant fervor once mainly associated with Yankee “fanaticism.”

To all appearances, the early American Catholic Church was so insubstantial and scattered that it scarcely seemed to pose much of a threat. The Church absorbed the preexisting base of Spanish and French colonization in Louisiana and the Deep South, but in many respects, it was a case of starting out all over again, since Catholicism in those regions had either stagnated or been left to benign neglect as colonial powers shuffled their holdings and pulled out. It was a provisional church operating under the thinly secured freedoms of a Revolution that—for once—it supported. If it were to have any clout, the church needed more bodies.

Slowly at first, and then, in a floodtide, it got them. Suddenly, Maryland, and subsequently Baltimore, come into prominence, as the families of the early subjects of this study, who constituted part of the early Irish American diaspora (a term originally applied to Jews, now extended to Irish Catholics), were released into this geography. I will start with the first: James Ryder Randall's (Chapter II) paternal English and Irish ancestors arrived in the seventeenth century to found Randalstown. His mother was born to Acadian exiles that settled in Baltimore in 1755. Randall was a Baltimorean in the southern mold, as his best-known anthem, "Maryland, My Maryland," emphatically announced.

Wolfe Tone and his society of United Irishmen were fomenting rebellion in the years leading up to the rebellion, and Theodore O'Hara's (Chapter II) father may have found that things had gotten too hot for him to remain in his motherland. Kean O'Hara arrived in Maryland in 1793 and gathered his resources before striking west for Kentucky around 1800. There, his Catholic tribe and his estate increased: eight children, six slaves, and landholdings in five counties.²⁸ His lucre secured for his son the chance to become a journalist and poet.

Maryland enters in the family circumstances of both Flannery O'Connor and Margaret Mitchell (Chapter V), two of the secondary figures (although not secondary in importance) of this study. The Stephens and McGhanns branches of Margaret Mitchell's ancestry arrived in the seventeenth century to Calvert's Maryland before marching south (not west!) to better opportunities. The McGhanns eventually arrived at the Anglo Catholic Locust Grove settlement in what would become Taliaferro County, Georgia. The enclave within the cotton lands supported its own chapel, the Church of the Purification of the Blessed Virgin Mary, and a well-regarded "classical" school, Locust Grove Academy, where Alexander Stephens, vice-president of the Confederacy and one of Margaret Mitchell's relatives, was educated. Initially, the settlement drew from displaced Marylanders, then revolution-era French Catholics, and a second, later wave of Irish Catholics.

Two Irish Catholics married into Margaret Mitchell's line along the way. Both were maternal ancestors. Phillip Fitzgerald, fled in the wake of the '98 Rising and landed in Charleston, moving from there to the Georgia interior. Another Irish Catholic ancestor, John Stephens, left Ireland in the 1850's to join a brother who kept a shop in Augusta, went West to Tennessee for a time, and returned to Georgia for Confederate service.

Flannery O'Connor's family thread becomes interwoven at this point. Patrick Harty, Flannery O'Connor's first American ancestor, betook himself and his family to Locust Grove in 1824. Strict penal laws had applied in Georgia, as Spanish Florida and proximate French Louisiana posed a perceived double-threat. Yet the colony was tolerated and indeed thrived. Historian Dennis Clark alludes to "fifty families from Tipperary in Taliaferro County, Georgia, [who] worked their own land successfully without slaves."²⁹

By now we have reached the point where the first great wave—and it is always a “wave”—of Irish Catholic immigrants come in. Significantly, the careers of the Irish introduced thus far are not unlike the sort of yeoman-farmer-turned-plantation-squire that Wilbur Cash drolly sketched in *The Mind of the South*.³⁰ The time is ripe to introduce the last of the Maryland entrants, the family Ryan. Sometime after 1828, Matthew Abraham Ryan, his wife, Mary Coughlin Ryan, and his young family emigrated to the United States, possibly passing through Baltimore before settling down for a time in Hagerstown, Maryland, where some biographical accounts, eager to stake out Father Ryan’s southern roots, suggest that Matthew Abraham Ryan, Sr. worked as an overseer on a plantation.³¹

And here the story pauses for a moment, and telescopes to the family’s fortune, as it provides a usefully representative allegory of Irish labor in the southern economy. Most accounts describe the elder Ryan making his way either as a peddler or a merchant who started out by selling goods to laborers in Hagerstown. Hagerstown served as a nexus for Irish laborers, offering work for navvies, ditchers, and “engineers”—the drudge work similar to their lot in Ireland. The Chesapeake and Ohio canal was expanding westward from Georgetown, with Hagerstown slated on the route (President John Quincy Adams broke ground on the project in 1828, but it took three ominous tries to get the shovel into the soil). The improvement craze was gearing up. Andrew Jackson was the son of Scots-Irish immigrants, and during his presidency, the demand for cheap Irish labor surged. The channeling of the workforce “was the chief medium for the settlement of the Irish in Southern ports, river and rail centers, and inland cities.”³² Irish diggers literally carved their way into the interior, fanning out along the paths of capital-intensive projects; Irish women so commonly took housekeeping work that “Bridget” became synonymous with domestic.

In any event, as a rail and freight confluence, Hagerstown seized at the title of “Hub City” (a nickname that towns have preened for well into the current century) and pioneered the urban congestion that would plague America for centuries. Amid all the hubbub, bustle, and rampant speculation, it was a very good place for an immigrant laborer to land. Ryan biographer Joseph McKey suggests that “the father, evidently, had seen what a profitable business would be his if he could locate somewhere between Georgetown and Hagerstown and carry his pack to the laborers on the canal and railroad.”³³

In the notorious words of a Louisiana overseer, Irish immigrants faced work that was “death on niggers and mules.”³⁴ Historian David Gleeson affirms that there is some truth in the notion, since Irish immigrants generally started at the bottom of the labor ladder. Gleeson combed through census records to develop a snapshot of Irish labor in some of the urban centers where they had congregated at mid-nineteenth century. But the picture was not altogether bleak for the Irish, at least in terms of their class mobility. The majority worked in “menial, unskilled occupations,” and—as a percentage of the population—they were overrepresented in that category. Some Irish already filled white-collar jobs in the urban centers where they had congested by the mid-nineteenth century. And of these “white-collar Irish,” most “worked in merchandizing.” (In Gleeson’s hierarchy priests are also—naturally—“high-white-collar.”) The elder Ryan probably had some starting money, and thus made his way into a middleman, middle class profession. His son was an aspirant to the upper class, with all that it entailed, including the accumulation of social capital and the drive to establish himself as a member of the Solid South. Like so many of the writers in this study, Ryan was an arriviste.

The Irish Catholic immigrants in the South had to hurry to catch up with the Scots-Irish who preceded them by a generation or two. Some 250,000 Irish Presbyterians came to America in the eighteenth century and many had gained a preliminary berth as “Americans.” Their Protestantism melded with the American majority, even if their Irishness distinguished them. The intrepid Scots-Irish who fanned out to the South by way of the Shenandoah Valley would establish themselves throughout the frontier and southern backcountry.

Some of the newly-arrived Catholic Irish were helped along by these sympathetic, better-established Scots-Irish settlers. It would be a mistake to assume that the same intractable factionalism that divided them in their mother country estranged them in a new one. The idea that Ireland’s religious conflicts constitute a historical fixity is far too pat. Obviously, the conflicts changed over time. Some of the same religious distrust did resurface on American soil; in other instances, the Irish (to use the right Americanism) buried the hatchet. After all, both Protestant and Catholic immigrants understood that when they spoke, they would be pegged for Irish. Just as they had done in their homeland, Irish immigrants on both sides of the religious schism enthusiastically supported the Home Rule movements, many of which were mushrooming anew in America. Indeed, for the first part of the century, Ulster Irish described themselves as generically “Irish.” It was not until after the famine influx that the term “Scotch Irish” was coined. The designation can be one of mere convenience, since “Protestant” is implicit, or it can be pernicious, as when it is used to signify difference from “country,” “Romanist,” and “Yankee” Irish.³⁵

The new Irish immigrants faced a double assimilation challenge, or, for those who prefer a more heroic narrative of the suffering Irish, some have suggested a *triple* challenge: “The Irish Catholic immigrant of that day and for many years had a triple battle: to establish

himself as an American, to preserve his faith in a subtly antagonistic setting and to continue the fight for the freedom of his homeland.”³⁶ This view makes much of Irish strife, and too little of the opportunities that awaited Irish immigrants. But it does point to the complexity of Irish identity in America—which became even more complicated in the South. Responding to the notion that the South is “the most religious and least Catholic region of America,” Jon Anderson observes, “Catholics in the Bible Belt South...effectively participate in two cultures, one regional and another denominational, but as minorities in both. Many, in fact, register experiences of being a minority twice over, as Southerners in a church and as Catholics in a region that are each defined predominantly in other terms.”³⁷ The third shade of minority identity—Irishness—was more than academic to the southern immigrants.

Ironically, and quite fittingly, the Chesapeake and Ohio canal, forged of immigrant sweat and New World capital, was a dividing line between North and South, and a strategically vital boundary during the Civil War. Ryan was born on this dividing line, and he spent most of his life trying to get on the southern side of it. Eastern seaboard immigrants tended to cluster together in urban centers, introducing a conspicuously “foreign” element within the Protestant majority. Some decided, quite naturally, to go West, where significant numbers of Catholics were settling inconspicuously into new opportunities.³⁸

“Lace curtain Irish” became a conventional phrase to describe Irish who had climbed out of “shanty” status, so it would be fair to say that the Ryans were on their way to lace curtain living. Whatever his employment, Matthew Ryan raised enough money to leave. The Ryans headed for Missouri, quitting the state, but not the section.

And so we move with some of the players to St. Louis, the next point of the nexus. During his visit there in 1842, Charles Dickens noticed that “[t]he Roman Catholic religion, introduced here by the early French settlers, prevails extensively.”³⁹ Some thirty years later the Catholic majority menaced Edward King on his circuit around the South: “There is, of course, a very large Catholic population in St. Louis, but it is pretty evenly balanced by German skepticism.” In King’s alarm sounds a clear note of Nativist worry: “They have kept well abreast of the tide of secular education, and bid it open defiance on all occasions, while the skeptical and easy-going German laughs at their zealotry, and the American shuts his eyes to their growing power....Vast as is the growth of colleges and schools of various other denominations, such as the Baptist, the Methodist, and the Methodist Episcopal Church South, the Catholics keep even with them all. Ever since old Gribault, the first pastor in St. Louis, led his little flock of five hundred Frenchmen to the altar, Mother Church has been bold, dominant, defiant in the young capital of the West.”⁴⁰

Not only had she been bold, her numbers were growing rapidly. Census-takers did not ask their subjects about religious affiliation, but they did keep tabs on church property. Gauging by material investment alone, Catholic interests in Missouri were thriving. For a small minority, Catholics lavished wealth on the physical plant of their Church, and were a proportionally free spending lot. The years leading up to the Civil War saw unprecedented

total value of roman catholic church property, 1850

TOTAL VALUE OF ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH PRO

NAME	Value (approx.)
NEW YORK	1,580,000
MARYLAND	1,150,000
PENNSYLVANIA	1,080,000
LOUISIANA	1,050,000
OHIO	780,000
MISSOURI	500,000
MASSACHUSETTS	480,000
KENTUCKY	350,000
KALAMAZO	300,000
CALIFORNIA	250,000
ILLINOIS	240,000
INDIANA	180,000
MICHIGAN	160,000
NEW JERSEY	150,000
VIRGINIA	140,000
CONNECTICUT	120,000
TEXAS	110,000
GEORGIA	100,000
SOUTH CAROLINA	90,000
RHODE ISLAND	80,000
MISSISSIPPI	70,000
WISCONSIN	60,000
TENNESSEE	50,000
VERMONT	40,000
IOWA	30,000
MAINE	20,000
NEW HAMPSHIRE	15,000
DELAWARE	10,000
FLORIDA	5,000
ARKANSAS	5,000
NORTH CAROLINA	5,000
MINEOTA	5,000

STATE	NUMBER OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES, 1880	TOTAL CHURCHES (All denominations, including Jewish)	PERCENTAGE OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES	TOTAL VALUE OF PROPERTY, ALL CHURCHES	VALUE OF PROPERTY, CATHOLIC CHURCHES	NUMBER OF CATHOLIC CHURCHES, 1890	VALUE OF PROPERTY, ALL CHURCHES	VALUE OF PROPERTY, CATHOLIC CHURCHES	PERCENTAGE INCREASE IN CATHOLIC CHURCHES, 1890-1880
ALABAMA	8	1,375	0.58%	1,131,616	300,000	9	1,930,496	230,480	80.00%
ARKANSAS	7	362	1.93%	89,315	6,650	9	468,160	23,300	28.57%
CALIFORNIA	18	28	64.29%	267,800	233,500	86	1,863,340	916,000	377.78%
CONNECTICUT	12	734	1.63%	3,856,194	97,500	43	6,354,205	565,500	256.33%
DELAWARE	3	180	1.67%	340,345	15,000	6	846,150	51,300	100.00%
FLORIDA	5	177	2.82%	165,400	13,600	17	284,390	31,200	240.00%
GEORGIA	8	1,662	0.43%	1,269,359	79,500	8	2,440,391	148,500	0.00%
ILLINOIS	59	1,223	4.82%	1,462,185	220,400	156	6,880,810	1,636,400	164.41%
INDIANA	63	2,035	3.10%	1,629,585	167,725	127	4,065,274	665,025	101.59%
IOWA	18	207	8.70%	177,425	26,550	70	1,670,180	304,380	288.69%
KENTUCKY	48	1,845	2.60%	2,252,448	356,910	63	3,668,620	696,000	72.62%
LOUISIANA	537	17,928	17.62%	1,762,470	1,045,650	960	3,180,360	1,744,700	80.00%
MAINE	12	945	1.27%	1,425,845	20,700	21	2,886,905	192,720	158.33%
MARYLAND	85	909	7.15%	3,947,884	1,181,532	82	5,516,150	1,611,500	26.15%
MASSACHUSETTS	41	1,480	2.77%	10,208,184	477,500	86	15,363,807	1,967,750	114.63%
MICHIGAN	44	396	11.03%	723,600	159,775	88	2,334,040	241,600	100.00%
MINNESOTA	1	3	33.33%	900	100	47	478,200	168,250	4600.00%
MISSISSIPPI	9	1,018	0.89%	755,542	67,000	17	1,633,315	117,080	86.69%
MISSOURI	65	890	7.30%	1,561,610	497,575	86	4,509,767	1,391,632	35.38%
NEW HAMPSHIRE	2	626	0.32%	1,408,796	20,000	12	1,913,662	97,450	500.00%
NEW JERSEY	23	814	2.83%	3,680,936	133,385	61	7,762,705	815,360	195.22%
NEW YORK	176	4,135	4.26%	21,134,207	1,569,875	360	35,125,287	4,749,075	104.66%
NORTH CAROLINA	4	1,796	0.22%	5,900,753	5,900	7	1,969,227	41,300	75.00%
OHIO	150	3,858	3.90%	5,793,069	769,307	222	12,668,312	2,464,940	70.77%
PENNSYLVANIA	1,668	3,869	42.89%	11,696,315	1,064,204	27	2,261,470	223,440	93.44%
RHODE ISLAND	7	231	3.03%	1,254,400	72,500	23	3,308,350	565,900	228.57%
SOUTH CAROLINA	14	1,182	1.18%	2,172,246	78,315	11	3,481,236	304,300	-21.43%
TENNESSEE	4	2,021	0.20%	1,216,101	45,000	10	2,558,330	208,400	150.00%
TEXAS	13	339	3.63%	206,930	79,700	33	1,065,254	188,900	153.85%
VERMONT	8	599	1.34%	1,216,125	42,200	27	1,800,600	116,550	237.50%
VIRGINIA	17	2,368	0.71%	2,856,378	126,100	33	5,459,605	329,300	94.12%
WISCONSIN	64	365	17.53%	353,300	66,885	205	1,973,392	545,477	220.31%
TOTAL	418	13,669	3.07%	26,923,055	9,016,038	2,445	169,074,197	26,047,156	483.53%

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In 1846 an undistinguished couple of Irish Catholic immigrants named Ryan showed up, family in tow, to make a home in Irish-Catholic-friendly Saint Louis. One of their children would go on to become a priest, a Confederate nationalist and a Catholic apologist, and a versifier of national celebrity. The same year a previously unnoticed St. Louis slave named Dred Scott, walked into the city's Old Courthouse and sued for his freedom. Ten years later, after appeals and reversals, an Irish Catholic Baltimorean named Roger Brooke Taney (pronounced "Tawney") would settle the case and announce the supreme law of the land.⁴³ The Chief Justice held that blacks were "so far inferior, that they had no rights which the white man was bound to respect."⁴⁴ In the bloodless ruling there was an echo of British Lord Chancellor Bowen's infamous declaration: "The law does not suppose any such person to exist as an Irish Roman Catholic."

It was not by accident that an Irish Catholic secessionist from the South was messenger. Taney's ruling was a flashpoint incident crucial to understanding both the origins of the Civil War and the politics of southern Irish. Both Kate Chopin nee O'Flaherty and Abram Ryan developed a sense of southern loyalty by their upbringing in the Dred Scott state. Kate Chopin nee O'Flaherty was born in Saint Louis on February 8, 1850. Chopin's father, Thomas O'Flaherty, ultimately hitched his fortunes to Saint Louis, having quit County Galway in 1823. His father had been a British land agent, and it may be, as Emily Toth has suggested, that he wanted no part in abetting British landlordism. O'Flaherty spent a few years in New York before booking passage down the Ohio River on steamboat and debouching in the frontier city. There he established a boat business and married twice, the second time, to Kate's mother, Eliza Faris. He was one year younger than her father. O'Flaherty's mercantile fortunes, and social status, were on the rise.

Lafcadio Hearn, the last principal of this study, was born the same year as Kate O’Flaherty—on the isle of Santa Maura (Leucadia), off the west coast of Greece. Like Kate’s father, he was raised in Ireland, arrived in New York, and moved along the Ohio River. Only he was a late arrival. It was not until 1869, that Lafcadio Hearn took the train down the Irish-laid tracks. Unlike Thomas O’Flaherty, he stopped at the midway point. His life would later share many parallels with that of Thomas O’Flaherty’s strong-willed daughter.

Meanwhile, the Catholic Church estimated that there were 10,000 native Irish in Saint Louis by 1850.⁴⁵ The city had become the leading refuge for international Americans by 1860, and it claimed a population that was almost 60 percent foreign-born. Like Thomas O’Flaherty, Matthew Abraham Ryan opened up a shop not far from the waterfront. The Ryans were doing their best to get out of crowded quarters, and the O’Flaherty’s were already established. St. Louis was increasingly Irish, Catholic and urban, but hardly cosmopolitan. Kate Chopin’s best friend, Kitty Garesché, would later remember the St. Louis of her girlhood as a place where “[g]entlemen could hunt deer and grouse within a short distance, and Kate could stand on the sidewalk to watch the ‘Indians come to town,’ riding on horseback in procession, every month, from some nearby Reservation.”⁴⁶

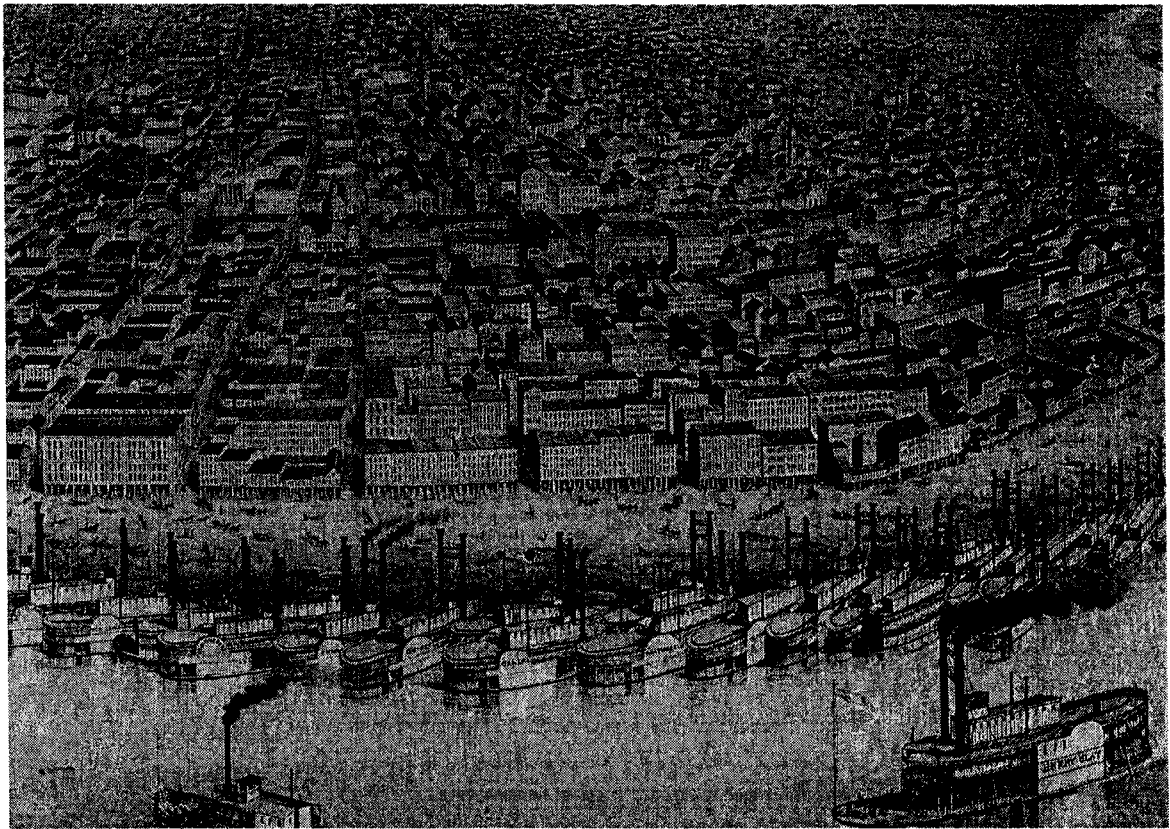


Illustration 2. Detail from an 1848 map of Saint Louis.⁴⁷

Competition and latent hostility between Germans and last-to-arrive Irish in Saint Louis ensured that the Irish there defined themselves largely in opposition to the buttoned-down *Deutsches*. (The Irish were probably not averse to quaffing lager from the Bavarian Brewing Company, later to become the Anheuser-Busch empire). Lutheran German refugees from the failed revolution of 1848 were not interested in visions of slavocracy or Catholic neighbors who cherished them. So a portion of Saint Louis Irish were anti-German, anti-Union, and pro-southern. According to press accounts, the Irish made poor neighbors. Crime reports dutifully noticed when an “Irishman” was involved. The Northside, rough-

and-tumble ghetto dubbed “Kerry Patch” was expanding. It would house many of Saint Louis’s Irish poor.

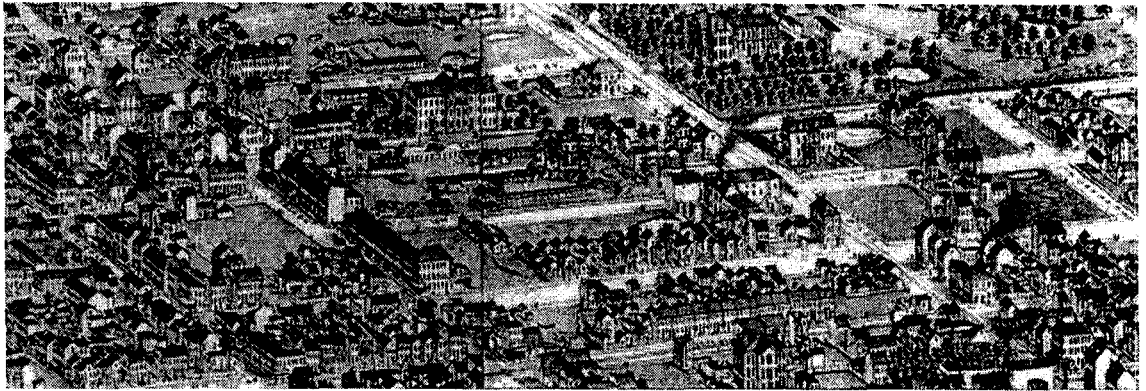


Illustration 3. Kerry Patch, based on an 1875 map.⁴⁸

Compounding the difficulties of ethnic division, the Know-Nothing movement was gaining momentum nationwide. In 1855, Theodore O’Hara faced Know-Nothings in Mobile who rioted against “Romanish Irish.” Henry A. Wise of Virginia, a stalwart southern rights advocate, indicted Know-Nothingism as concealing the “plans of Exeter Hall, in old England, acting on Williams Hall, in New England, for a hierarchical proscription of religions, for the demolition of some of the clearest standards of American liberty, and for a fanatical and sectional demolition of slavery.”⁴⁹ Southern Irish heard the message loud and clear. It resounded in the worried chambers of Irish Nationalist meetings, it emanated from northern reports, and it circulated in the press. They saw New England’s shadow in acts of nativist bigotry. Wise had struck an anglophobic chord that resonated profoundly among the Southern Irish.

Nativists cooked up a conspiracy theory insinuating that a papal plot was underway to control the Mississippi River valley. Mobs attacked the Catholic churches, the Jesuit’s Saint Louis University, and Irish residences in recurrent flare-ups of anti-Catholic violence.

Ultimately, the issues faded in front of the looming war. Missouri was a crucible of the conflict, indeed, a Civil War in miniature before the first shots were fired. The horrific epoch would change the lives of all the nineteenth century southern Irish writers, save Lafcadio Hearn, who was lucky enough to arrive after it had ended.

Where did the southern Irish fit into the conflict? Up to this point, one might have the impression that the Irish were popping up everywhere on the southern fringes. But this is a study of a minority, regardless of how important Irish southern writers may have been in writing the South. On the eve of the war, there were around 84,000 Irish-born people in the Southern states.⁵⁰ Single cities in the North could claim greater numbers of Irish than the entire South, and the Irish clearly remained a minority in Dixie.

	1850		1860	
	Irish % of Total Population	Irish % of White Population	Irish % of Total Population	Irish % of White Population
South	0.78	1.26	0.98	1.56
Alabama	0.47	0.85	0.59	1.08
Arkansas	0.24	0.31	0.30	0.40
Florida	1.00	1.86	0.59	1.06
Georgia	0.35	0.61	0.62	1.11
Louisiana	4.69	9.50	3.98	7.89
Mississippi	0.32	0.65	0.49	1.10
North Carolina	0.06	0.10	0.09	0.14
South Carolina	0.60	1.48	0.71	1.70
Tennessee	0.26	0.35	1.12	1.51
Texas	0.66	0.91	0.57	0.82
Virginia	1.02	1.28	1.35	1.57

Table 3. Irish as a percentage of southern population, 1850 and 1860.⁵¹

1860 Population Distribution of the Eleven Future Confederate States *				
	WHITE	SLAVE	FREE BLACK **	TOTAL
ALABAMA	526,271 (54.6%)	435,080 (45.1%)	2,690 (0.3%)	964,041
ARKANSAS	324,143 (74.4%)	111,115 (25.5%)	144 (0.1%)	435,402
FLORIDA	77,747 (55.4%)	61,745 (44.0%)	932 (0.7%)	140,424
GEORGIA	591,550 (56.0%)	462,198 (43.7%)	3,500 (0.3%)	1,057,248
LOUISIANA	357,456 (50.5%)	331,726 (46.9%)	18,647 (2.6%)	707, 829
MISSISSIPPI	353,899 (44.7%)	436,631 (55.2%)	773 (0.1%)	791,303
NORTH CAROLINA	629,942 (63.5%)	331,059 (33.4%)	30,463 (3.1%)	991,464
SOUTH CAROLINA	291,300 (41.4%)	402,406 (57.2%)	9,914 (1.4%)	703,620
TENNESSEE	826,722 (74.5%)	275,719 (24.9%)	7,300 (0.7%)	1,109,741
TEXAS	420,891 (69.7%)	182,566 (30.2%)	355 (0.1%)	603,812
VIRGINIA	1,047,299 (65.6%)	490,865 (30.8%)	58,042 (3.6%)	1,596,206
TOTAL	5,447,220 (59.9%)	3,521,110 (38.7%)	132,760 (1.5%)	9,101,090

* All percentages are rounded to the nearest tenth.

** Includes all free persons of African descent.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Office, Eighth Census [1860], *Population*, Washington, D.C., 1864.

Table 4. 1860 Population Distribution of the Eleven Future Confederate States⁵²

Though few in numbers, they flocked to the war footing. John Mitchel suggested that 40,000 southern Irish Catholics fought for the Confederacy, a number that must be inflated, since it would mean that they fought to a man (not to mention a boy), essentially. David Gleeson halves that number to a more plausible 20,000, in which case, “around 70 percent of able-bodied Irish men served in the Confederate armed forces”—an astonishing number, in any case.⁵³

Even adolescent Katie O’Flaherty was swept up in the times. When someone anonymously pinned a Union Flag to the front door of the residence she was incensed and impulsively tore it down (young secesh sympathizers were taught never to walk under the national banner). This was ground for investigation, and the girl barely escaped arrest for her sedition! The incident earned her some celebrity in the press as the city’s “Littlest Reb,” but in later years, Kate Chopin took a far more critical view of warfare, both in her comments and her fiction. She gave the purloined flag to a son.

Both Abram Ryan and Kate Chopin were impacted profoundly by the loss of a brother during the war. Chopin’s brother died of typhoid while imprisoned in a Yankee camp and Ryan’s brother died in combat. It is, of course, impossible to produce monolithic explanations for Irish American volunteerism. It is much easier to dispel them. Some Irish Americans who fought for the Union were motivated by a desire to suppress rebellion and preserve the union, plain and simple. They had seen enough of division in Ireland. Irish Americans, or more accurately at the time, Irish Southerners who supported the Confederacy, were equally determined. They saw themselves as supporting the underdog, resisting the invaders of their adopted homeland, rejecting a strong centralized government, and securing for themselves the instant status that had been conferred upon their arrival. After all, the

badge of whiteness gave them a leg up, albeit at the expense of slaves, and they intended to retain the extra privileges they had been denied in their mother country. Recurrent Nativist movements reminded them that theirs was a precarious position, and memories of enforced servitude under British rule haunted them. So they defended their social position, such as it was, with a kind of convulsive zeal.

Certainly every historical moment is unique in the sense that one may never stand in the same river twice. The business of the historian, in that sense, lies in distinguishing the uniqueness of each moment, not in conflating them. But common themes do arise, and the confusion of the histories of Irish and southern independence stems partly from the existence, and sometimes the mere appearance, of common cause. The comparisons are seductive and there is a danger of transcribing similarity where there was none. After all, what white southerner could resist the tale of poor agrarian rebels brought to heel by an arrogant outside power, subjected to humiliating military occupation and economic colonization? More enticingly, some of the terms superficially overlap. In 1801, *Unionists* (who supported the union of Ireland and Great Britain) whose stronghold was in the *North* (of Ireland) crushed Irish hopes for (Catholic) *Emancipation* (the end to the ban on Catholics in parliament).

Nor were the galvanized southern Irish insensible to parallels, partly by dint of their religion. The story of Irish assimilation in the South is a tale of Catholic assimilation that owes some of its success to a pre-existing congruence between generic Catholic culture and southern culture. “Later, this ethnic awareness became even more useful in building bonds with natives when the Irish recognized parallels between Ireland’s relationship with Britain and the South’s with the North. Paradoxically, then, their retention of a strong “Irishness” actually advanced their integration.”⁵⁴

Having said that, it is still hard to fathom why the southern Irish took up arms for a Protestant and culturally anglophilic South. Did they enjoy white privilege that much? Were they that ambitious? Was there enough comity, or competition, with the Scots Irish to win them over? Were they so accustomed to soldiering, and so poor, that they naturally fell in? Or were they swept up in the exuberance that erupted all over the South when Sumter was shelled? Did they share Gerald O'Hara's vision of land and chattels? One must put aside southern defeat for a moment to appreciate that for white southerners, Sumter marked the beginning of a new nation, with all the hope and ambition that it entailed. And of course the problem here lies in the "they"—obviously, the southern Irish had reasons as various as the individuals.

Whatever else they fought for, it has become something of a truism that Irish Americans on neither side fought for African Americans. They had little incentive to defend the African Americans who competed with them on the same socio-economic level, as the New York riots made shockingly apparent. A jingle that spread among Union Irish volunteers sums it up:

*To the tenets of Douglas we tenderly cling,
Warm hearts to the cause of our country we bring;
To the flag we are pledged—all its foes we abhor—
And we ain't for the nigger but we are for the war.*⁵⁵

Southern Irish were "for the war," too, but they rarely admitted slavery as the cause of their struggle. Instead, they rallied behind nationalist aspirations and the borrowed patriotic rhetoric of revolutionaries. John L. O'Sullivan's Confederate chant answers, showing how quickly southern Irish had copped on to the ethos of their chosen region:

*We're here from every Southern Home.
Close the ranks! Close up the ranks!
Fond weeping voice bade us come.*

Close the ranks! Close up the ranks!
The husband, brother, boy, and sire,
All burning with one holy fire—
Our country's love our only hire
*Close the ranks! Close up the ranks!*⁵⁶

From the aggregate of motivations, it came to pass that the South—enclosed in romantic nation-building dreams and extra-patriotic loyalties—won over the southern Irish. Perhaps even more remarkable is how many Catholic chaplains served the Confederacy. The number of Catholic chaplains in the Confederacy varies greatly by study, and part of it is a semantic issue; many historians count only the commissioned chaplains. The most complete roster of Civil War chaplains to date is found in *Faith in the Fight* (2003), which lists 31 Roman Catholics among the 1,355 Confederate chaplains, including Abram Joseph Ryan. Most bear German, Irish, and French names. The Union lists claim 52 Catholics, and around 2,435 Chaplains. As a percentage of the whole chaplainry, then, slightly more Catholic priests served the Confederacy than the Union! Both were clearly in the minority, garnering little more than two percent of the whole. Yet it is curious that the bulk of keynote scholarship on the Civil War religiosity makes scant mention of Catholics at all. Historian Clyde Wilson concedes that “the subject of Catholic reaction has begun to receive the serious study it deserves, but (to my knowledge) Catholic alternatives have never informed more general studies on the theological meaning of the conflict.”⁵⁷

“The unanimity of men at war,” wrote critic Edmund Wilson in his immortal *Patriotic Gore*, “is like that of a school of fish, which will swerve, simultaneously and without any apparent leadership, when the shadow of an enemy appears, or like a sky-darkening flight of grasshoppers, which, also all compelled by one impulse, will descend to consume the crops.”⁵⁸ Just so. It is hard to find reason in war, or in the mob, but in

ambition, there is always cold reason. The war presented an opportunity, in Ignatiev's terms, for the Irish fully to "become white."⁵⁹ For marginal Americans and southerners, there was no better chance to prove their mettle than the Civil War.

Even the clergy marked the opportunity well. They were the natural leaders of southern Irish Catholics, and a thorough consideration of their solidarity is vital to any understanding of the war-era southern Irish—particularly their defense of the peculiar institution. That Catholic contribution to proslavery ideology has fallen largely from view. Drew Gilpin Faust's landmark anthology, *The Ideology of Slavery*, compasses none of the Catholic defenses. Nevertheless, in Catholic scholastic circles, these defenses are a matter of common knowledge (or at least a poorly kept secret). American Catholicism had been entangled in slavery from the earliest settlements, and from her earliest history in the Americas, the Church was an unapologetically slaveholding institution.

The Catholic perspective on slavery is worth sketching here because it touched the life of every writer in this study: Abram Ryan fumed in the racial discourse, Kate Chopin had a "mammy," and Lafcadio Hearn wrestled with the forms of slavery in his work. Moreover, Catholic slavery apologists were notable contributors, for better or for worse, to the body of southern Irish writing. Broadly speaking, the clear moral problem of slavery suggested two ways out for Southern Christians. They could disclaim an interest in worldly affairs and emphasize the way to salvation. Or they could call for "Southern society to repent not of the institution but its abuse."⁶⁰ White southerners were thin-skinned about "political preaching," and preferred to preserve the fiction of the apolitical pulpit.⁶¹

Southern Catholic clergy such as Abram Ryan enjoyed more latitude, in this respect. They accepted the notion that American democracy required separation of church and state,

but institutionally they were preconditioned to think otherwise. Ryan broke the taboo repeatedly in his columns, pointing out that separation doctrine was little more than “a theory which the pope has unequivocally branded as erroneous and heretical.” But Ryan was a loose cannon, and his very public stand likely discomfited all but the most dogmatic coreligionists.

Indeed, this intractable question of loyalty has always been the bugaboo of American Catholicism, and most often resolved by the equivocal proviso that Caesar’s law is to be obeyed, but if it conflicts with Church teaching, it is to be amended.⁶² Such split loyalties were not likely to satisfy the litmus test of American “republicanism,” and church leaders compounded the trouble by contradictory pronouncements. A surprising number simply supported slavery as it existed in the South.

These Catholic apologists drew from the currents of other pro-slavery ideologues, but they brought their distinctly Catholic worldview to them. They tapped the deep fund of dogmatic teaching and extra-biblical authority unique to Roman Catholicism. Writing in the vein of church logicians, they drew from the collective epistolary tradition, citing chapter and verse authority to bolster their positions. In doing so, they followed a distinctly Catholic tradition. Theologians had built the doctrine surrounding the catechism exactly as legislators construct a code, following consensus and precedent. They ventilated their views publicly and in print, and, as one commentator put it, they “uttered the right shibboleth of southern society.”⁶³

The expressly political, proslavery Catholic pulpit furnishes perhaps the most ignominious example of Church politicking in American history, and serves as fair warning to those who would transgress the church/state division. There is no better illustration of the hubristic disaster that can result from immersion in the politics of a moment. It is clearly

possible to be very wrong about the politics of a moment, and to split hairs in defense of political ends, at the expense of more enduring principles.⁶⁴

The issue was impolitic by nature and it offered no clean-hands debate. Once battle came down, Catholics leaders grew more outspoken, and at least four Bishops in the young American church professed slavery's acceptability. A majority of southern priests tacitly supported slavery for the "good" of their section, even as their superiors appealed for calm. The slavery issue was indivisible from the Confederate nationalism that predominated, with few exceptions, among southern priests. The situation of Archbishop Francis Patrick Kenrick of Baltimore—brother of Archbishop Peter Richard Kenrick, both Dublin-born and Maynooth-educated—was typical.⁶⁵ His priests refused to read the traditional prayer calling for God's blessing of the Union, and charged with holding together his flock, he recited it himself. It did not play well to his Confederate-leaning congregation, and "many people got up and publicly left the Cathedral, and those who remained expressed dissent from the Archbishop's petition by a great rustling of papers and silks."⁶⁶ That was in Baltimore—one can imagine points further south.

Many Catholics—including the small number of slaveholding southern Irish Catholics—simply read the Papal proscription of slavery legalistically: trafficking in slaves was *verboten*, but the letter did not reach the question of slavery itself. Under this strained interpretation, the pope's letters were just kibitzing. In theory, by enlarging on the doctrine, the slave trade was *malum prohibitum* (forbidden evil), not *malum in se* (evil in and of itself). In practice, they steered an uneasy course, accepting the status quo. Yet Kenrick, whom John Bowes calls "arguably the best American Catholic theologian of his time," literally wrote the book on Catholic moral doctrine, and reached the peremptory conclusion that

slavery was morally permissible. In his comprehensive *Theologica Moralis*, Kenrick argued that masters had only the right to slaves' labor. Masters were obliged to treat slaves well. He could sanction lineal slavery by the ancient principle of *partus sequitur ventrem* (literally, the offspring follow the womb)—a maxim historically invoked to settle the ownership of livestock. Part of Catholicism's genius for cultural adaptation was its insistence that the virtuous should obey Caesar while leaving matters of salvation to the Church. Thus Kenrick specifically advised against breaking the law by emancipating slaves, and felt comfortable instructing Catholic southerners to hew the line. It seems that the Catholics had learned some things from the Romans, whose all-purpose government template left plenty of room for the local variations of preexisting cultures.

As Alfred Lord Whitehead sagely remarked, religions commit suicide when they find their inspirations in their dogmas. The priests cottoned shamelessly to the regional political climate with a view to the preservation of their own churches. It was a selling-out, and in the short term, it worked. The strategy paid handsome dividends when "Nativists tried in vain to tar the Church with the brush of abolitionism" during the 1850s upsurge. Know-Nothings made weak inroads in the South, in part because "the Catholic stance on slavery, like the Church's subsummation in Southern life generally, contributed much to the puny anti-Catholic thrust of Southern Know-Nothingism."⁶⁷ A Know-Nothing resolution from Massachusetts explicitly links Catholicism and slavery: "Roman Catholicism and slavery being alike founded and supported on the basis of ignorance and tyranny; and being, therefore, natural allies in every warfare against liberty and enlightenment; therefore, be it Resolved, That there can exist no real hostility to Roman Catholicism which does not embrace slavery, its natural co-worker in opposition to freedom and republican

institutions.”⁶⁸ Obviously, Know-Nothingism only pushed churchmen further into the slaveholder’s corner.

Bishop Augustin Verot, who was Abram Ryan’s friend and mentor, went one further: he became a states rights apologist, and published a *sui generis* Catholic defense of the right to secede. After he was reassigned to Savannah (with Florida remaining his vicariate), he produced the short-lived diocesan paper called *The Pacificator*. The *Pacificator* seemed destined to a certain amount of double-talk, since its banner sued for peace, but it immediately took up southern apologetics. In the salutatorian issue, writing as “a Catholic Divine,” Verot painted the North as an “unjust aggressor.” Verot’s classical analysis followed three prongs, questions which “any man of sense ought to premise to any important undertaking: *An liceat? An deceat? An expediat?* Is it lawful? Is it becoming? Is it expedient?” Answering in the affirmative, Verot makes the case that the South exercised a theologically just right of defense. Should there be any doubt about it, Verot has an answer, taken directly from his seminarian hornbooks: *in dubio melior est conditio possidentis* (in case of doubt, the possessor has the benefit of the doubt).⁶⁹ Lucky for the slaveholders. Verot hastens to add that peaceful negotiation must be the first resort. He fashions his response catechistically, citing authority in each case, including Kenrick’s *Theologia Moralis*. Verot did in fact promulgate a catechism for his southern diocese—his booklet included instructions for the religious stewardship of slaves.⁷⁰

Catholic southerners who supported the cause of the predominantly Protestant slavocracy proved their solidarity with white southerners but, in the long run, potentially undermined their own interests by pandering to the establishment. It posed no great stretch, however. Catholics in the region recognized in the traditional, hierarchical base of southern

culture a correlate that agreed easily with their naturally conservative outlook. Kate O'Flaherty (Chopin) had been raised to accept slavery. Her family had owned marriage slaves before "losing" them in the war (they ran away) and her husband was the son of a plantation owner who was, by all accounts, unflinchingly brutal with his slaves. Marriage precipitated Chopin's move to Louisiana. Only the marriage required adjustment; she made the cultural transition from Saint Louis to New Orleans rather easily. Navigating the complicated gradations of Creole racial orders was second nature to her because she was comfortable with hierarchies in all human relations.

Likewise, Lafcadio Hearn, who began his American existence as a racial ingénue and somewhat rashly believed he could marry a mixed-race woman happily in Cincinnati, and later reached the conclusion that mixed race children were "an all-powerful element of discord." The dusky-skinned writer had a special sensitivity to social order; in Martinique he meticulously catalogued the spectrum, "ranging up from black or nearly black through bronze reds and coppery browns and fruit yellows to the dead ivory of the *sang-mêlé*," and the status of each. Though he had formally renounced the Catholic faith, he found something very familiar and comforting in the Old World mores of New Orleans. Hearn possessed a deeply ingrained respect for authority—a quality that the Irish are said, stereotypically, to lack.

Kate Chopin moved to New Orleans in 1870 to set up a household. In the same year, Ryan journeyed to New Orleans, and for the remainder of his semi-settled life he divided his time between New Orleans and Mobile. Abram Ryan was no stranger to the Crescent City. His priestly peregrinations had often taken him down the river, and he probably counseled his secessionist students to transfer to the Boulogne seminary there. During his delta days he

would attend the victims of periodic outbreaks of yellow fever, commonly called “Stranger’s Fever.” The mosquito-borne illness took a heavy toll on crowded, miasmic immigrant hovels, including the Irish quarter.

Lafcadio Hearn was to join them. He bade farewell to Cincinnati in 1877 and floated the Mississippi, recording his growing excitement as he approached the city that instantly enamored him. With his landing, the journey is complete, and this history nears its end at the third gateway of the Irish nexus. New Orleans is at once the most southern of locales and a far remove from representative southernness. Of course, that depends partly on where one stands: which South is under discussion, in the framework of “one South, many Souths”? In the New Orleans cultural gumbo one finds a long-established Catholic society, elements of Mediterranean culture, and Brooklynesque accents juxtaposed with the opulence of cotton wealth, the full sampler of southern foodways, and places rich with Civil War lore.

The place is so much its own organism, and so full of contrasts, that it exists on the perimeter of southern imagination. And so it is only fitting that it was long a center for southern Irish immigration. As David Gleeson put it, “The Irish experience in the Old South...was primarily urban.”⁷¹ New Orleans and St. Louis form an Irish Catholic axis; Irish populations circulated between the two, by way of the Mississippi, and spread tendrils in other parts of the delta (though they also entered the eastern seaboard from many other ports). In *Ulysses*, Joyce admired the diurnal rhythms of human interchange in Dublin, the somehow organic pulse of life, systolic and diastolic, and surely the same applies to the in- and outflows of these two poles, points within a larger web of frenetic activity, connections of blood and fortune-making, in a continent as restless as an ant colony.

Frederick Law Olmsted, the Connecticut Yankee who designed Central Park, noted his impressions of the Irish around New Orleans. He encountered an Irish policeman and cab driver, “and heard about Irish men laboring for black tradesmen.” Oakey Hall, a member of New Orleans bar and one of the most corrupt of New York’s Tammany Hall mayors, mentioned a “third section” down the river, “given over to the tender mercies of the Dutch and the Irish, and usual accompaniments of flaxen-polled babies and flaxen-tailed pigs.”⁷² And multiple commentators suggest that the lives of Irish diggers were cheap. Irish workers on the New Basin Canal were to be preferred, according to one testimonial, because “a good slave costs at this time two hundred pounds sterling, and to have a thousand such swept off a line of canal in one season would call for prompt consideration.” At one point, canal workers were recruited directly from Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Some have claimed that as many as 20,000 Irishmen died building New Orleans canals.⁷³ This is probably inflated, but it is certain that many Irish immigrants did die in dangerous construction projects, including such formidable tasks as building railroads through the swamps around the city.

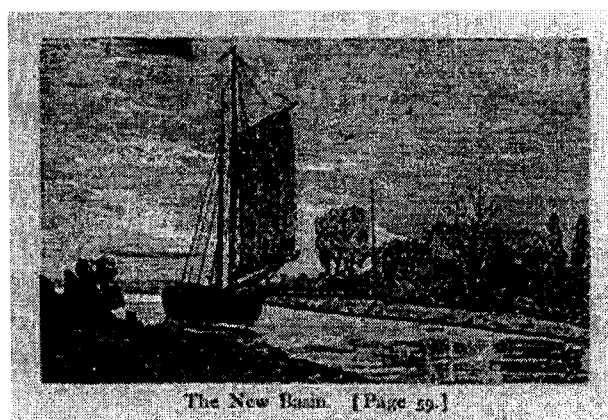


Illustration 4. The New Basin Canal. ⁷⁴

Over 100,000 Irish immigrants poured into New Orleans in the nineteenth century. The Crescent City claimed the largest Irish population of any urban area in the South, as well

as the largest group of prefamine workers. The Irish lived in all the city's wards and *fauborgs* (literally, false cities, carved out of expansive plantation properties) and centralized in an area known as the Irish Channel. "Even before the famine influx, [the third ward] contained the largest Irish community in the Old South, including an Irish market, 'Irish' church, Catholic school, the workhouse, and the Catholic girls' orphanage."⁷⁵

After the famine, more Irish poured in, leading one New Orleans native to comment of St. Therese of Avila Church—constructed to accommodate the Irish influx—"all Ireland seemed to be streaming from its portals." Moreover, he noted, "[i]t is astonishing how large an element they form in our resident population, that is the Irish. A stranger from Dublin or Londonderry might fancy himself at home again on our streets, especially about the time of 'matins' or 'vespers.'"⁷⁶ Father Abram Ryan was a celebrity among them. As editor of New Orleans' venerable Catholic newsweekly, *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, he shepherded his flock, delivering knuckle-rapping admonitions to backsliders, weekly doses of humor, and a steady stream of southern nationalistic sentiment.

As usual, a pecking order formed, and better-established New Orleans residents came to term post-famine arrivals "channel Irish." Kate Chopin's first New Orleans address was in the Irish Channel neighborhood, a far remove from the luster of aristocratic Creole neighborhoods. Her parish church was St. Patrick's, notwithstanding her and her husband's Creole connections. When penniless Lafcadio Hearn set down his bags (he only carried one, and wore his absurdly broad-brimmed trademark hat when he traveled), it was in the American District, in the cheapest furnished apartment he could find. He consorted with New Orleans Irish throughout his years there and eventually boarded with an Irishwoman who doted on him. Hearn counted many friends among the Channel Irish.



Illustration 5. St. Patrick's, as it would have appeared to Kate Chopin.⁷⁷

Like Kate Chopin, Thelma Ducoing Toole—John Kennedy Toole's mother—came of mixed Irish/Creole stock. Her mother and grandmother were Irish; her husband's family had arrived after the famine. John Dewey Toole, Jr.'s grandparents were Irish immigrants who moved into the Channel after consecrating a trans-Catholic, interethnic marriage—Mary Orfila Toole was a second generation American with a “large Spanish family.”⁷⁸ A first priority for Thelma Toole, a would-be climber who made much of name cachet but had no wealth, was to move uptown. Her son would pen a ripping yarn with an unyielding Catholic elitist as its hero—and then tear the whole thing apart with the satirical exuberance so common to Irish writers.

And that makes a good ending point for this very brief history. With Kate Chopin and the Toolles this capsule history orients toward the twentieth century, the subject of a brief treatment in the final chapter of this dissertation. The journey has followed a set of typically venturesome immigrants on a continental traverse, and gone down the river to the Irish center

of the Deep South. With the outliers of place thus situated within their region, I turn now to individual studies.

Notes

- ¹ Kerby A. Miller, Emigrants and Exiles : Ireland and the Irish Exodus to North America (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985) 14-17.
- ² Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 12.
- ³ Jeremiah Joseph O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia: Leaves of Its History ... A.D. 1820 - A.D. 1878 (New York,: D. J. Sadlier, 1879) 140-41.
- ⁴ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 8.
- ⁵ Guy Fawkes Day. The colonists, like their English forbears, cheerfully burned the pope in effigy on that day.
- ⁶ William Byrd and William Kenneth Boyd, Histories of the Dividing Line Betwixt Virginia and North Carolina. With Introd. And Notes by William K. Boyd, and a New Introd. By Percy G. Adams (New York: Dover Publications, 1967).
- ⁷ George M. Barringer, Hubert J. Cloke , Rev. Emmett Curran, S. J., Jon K. Reynolds. The American Mission: Maryland Jesuits from Andrew White to John Carroll. Special Collection Division, Georgetown University.
- ⁸ George M. Corp Author Georgetown University Barringer and Library, The American Mission : Maryland Jesuits from Andrew White to John Carroll ; an Exhibit in the Special Collections Division, Georgetown University Library, 27 September - 29 November, 1976 (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University, 1976).
- ⁹ A tradition that spanned three centuries ended, fittingly, in Ryan's birth year, when the Jesuits opted out, "not by manumitting [their] 272 slaves (a practice that was not uncommon in Maryland at the time), but by selling them to two sugar plantation owners in Louisiana." The slaves were sold down the river—but with appropriate care to deliver the unfortunate souls to Catholic territory. Maura Jane Farrelly in *The Journal of Southern Religion* (Vol 5, 2002), reviewing Thomas Murphy, Jesuit Slaveholding in Maryland, 1717-1838 (New York: Routledge, 2001).
- ¹⁰ J. T. Marck, Maryland, the Seventh State : A History, 4th ed. (Glen Arm, Md.: Creative Impressions, 1998).
- ¹¹ Barringer and Library, The American Mission : Maryland Jesuits from Andrew White to John Carroll ; an Exhibit in the Special Collections Division, Georgetown University Library, 27 September - 29 November, 1976.

- ¹² Kenny, The American Irish: A History. Raymond Schmandt, "An Overview of Institutional Establishments in the Antebellum Catholic Church." In Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture (Mercer, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983) 55.
- ¹³ Jay P. Dolan, In Search of an American Catholicism : A History of Religion and Culture in Tension (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 2002) 35.
- ¹⁴ My own analysis leads me to believe that some Irish Churchmen mitigated, circumvented, and even obstructed the absolute claims of British colonization by playing the ends against the middle. Father John Murphy, a hero of the 1798 Rising, was captured, stripped, flogged, hanged, and beheaded. Just to make certain, his corpse was then burned in a barrel, and his head spiked across from the local Church. English troops forced the local residents to open their windows to experience firsthand the "holy smoke" of his impromptu pyre.
- Other Irish clergy worked in quite the opposite direction, maintaining the colonial headlock at the expense of their parishioners; these instances are well documented in Irish ambivalence toward famine-era clergy. These Catholics bitterly resented what they saw as clerical complicity in the Protestant Ascendancy, and many still blame the religious for their role in the famine.
- Still, the Church could be an attractive ally for nationalists, even a pliant foil, and so some Irish confreres championed a very dogmatic strain of the faith. Their role, in this sense, was intercessory, and those that did not wind up in the pockets of the ruling political order could work effectively in a diplomatic capacity.
- ¹⁵ Dolan, In Search of an American Catholicism : A History of Religion and Culture in Tension.
- ¹⁶ Letter to Dr. T.R. Spivey, 16 Nov 1958. Strident Catholicism has been a cyclical phenomenon, and some scholars have suggested that a religiously galvanized Ireland is of relatively recent, and even post-famine vintage despite the venerable church presence in Irish history. The cause and effect relationships are, alas, academic, being both endemic and systemic, and accordingly impossible to sort out. This chicken-or-the-egg problem, and the lack of consensus, leads Karl Bottingheimer to ask rhetorically, "Did religious division give rise to 'colonialism' [in Ireland]? Or did 'colonialism' give rise to religious division? There seems no satisfactory answer except that the processes became intertwined, constantly reinforcing each other." Kenneth Raymond Andrews, Nicholas P. Canny, P. E. H. Hair and David B. Quinn, The Westward Enterprise : English Activities in Ireland, the Atlantic, and America, 1480-1650 (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1979) 58.
- ¹⁷ John Cogley, Catholic America, Two Centuries of American Life (New York,: Dial Press, 1973) 78.

- ¹⁸ Nicholas P. Cushner, Soldiers of God : The Jesuits in Colonial America, 1565-1767, 1st English ed. (Buffalo, NY: Language Communications, 2002) 299.
- ¹⁹ John Adams, Thomas Jefferson, Abigail Adams, Lester Jesse Cappon and Institute of Early American History and Culture (Williamsburg Va.), The Adams-Jefferson Letters : The Complete Correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and Abigail and John Adams (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture at Williamsburg Virginia by the University of North Carolina Press, 1988).
- ²⁰ Hal Crowther, "Float Fishing in the Ring of Fire," Southern Cultures 10.1 (2004).
- ²¹ His concluding epigraph comes from the Vulgate Song of Songs: "I am black but beautiful...as the tents of Cedar, as the curtains of Solomon. Do not consider me that I am brown, because the sun hath altered my colour: the sons of my mother have fought against me." It is not at all clear whether he was alluding to Catholic/Protestant conflicts in America, the status of southern Catholics, the deceased faithful that preceded him, or to the slaves—all possible referents from the preceding paragraphs. Perhaps he saw some common cause between slaves and southern Catholics, whose Protestant brothers "fought against" them. O'Connell could be subtle when he dropped his polemical defenses, and the ambiguity may well be deliberate, a resort to southern politesse about the indelicate topic of the peculiar institution. O'Connell, Catholicity in the Carolinas and Georgia: Leaves of Its History ... A.D. 1820 - A.D. 1878 385.
- ²² Kenny, The American Irish: A History 74.
- ²³ Raymond H. Schmandt, "An Overview of Institutional Establishments in the Antebellum Southern Church," Catholics in the Old South: Essays on Church and Culture, eds. Randall M. Miller and Jon L. Wakelyn (Mercer, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1983) 54.
- ²⁴ On the latter point, see Rhys Isaac, The Transformation of Virginia : 1740-1790 (Chapel Hill: Published for the Institute of Early American History and Culture Williamsburg VA. by University of North Carolina Press, 1982).
- ²⁵ In William L. Andrews, Minrose Gwin, Trudier Harris and Fred C. Hobson, The Literature of the American South: A Norton Anthology, 1st ed. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1998) 93. Abolitionists painted the South as a hotbed of master-slave sexual perversity in wildly imaginative ways. The strategy worked both ways; slavery apologists tied abolitionism to perversion (citing the particular excesses of William Lloyd Garrison), and claiming as did Hammond that "such rage without betrays the fires within." For a keynote treatment, see Ronald G. Walters, "The Erotic South: Civilization and Sexuality in American Abolitionism," American Quarterly 25.2 (1973).
- ²⁶ Christine Leigh Heyrman, Southern Cross : The Beginnings of the Bible Belt, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1997).

- ²⁷ Crowther, "Float Fishing in the Ring of Fire."
- ²⁸ Nathaniel Cheairs Hughes and Thomas Clayton Ware, Theodore O'hara : Poet-Soldier of the Old South, 1st ed. (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1998) 8.
- ²⁹ Clark, Dennis. "The South's Irish Catholics: A Case of Cultural Confinement." Miller and Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture 208.
- ³⁰ W. J. Cash, The Mind of the South, Vintage Books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1991) 14-17.
- ³¹ Baltimore was home to an early Irish Catholic religious press that later published Ryan's work. Free-spirited John Kenedy had booked passage to Boston in 1816, worked for a time in a Baltimore quarry, traded his way to Saint Louis, and eventually returned to Baltimore, a path not so dissimilar from Abram Ryan's father. He built a modest publishing industry by supplying Catholics with prayer books and religious paraphernalia, and the outfit limped along until John's son, Patrick, could take over the outfit. P.J. Kenedy and Sons, would later bring out editions of Father Abram Ryan's poems.
- ³² Clark, Dennis. "The South's Irish Catholics: A Case of Cultural Confinement." Miller and Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture 197.
- ³³ "Niagara University and Father Ryan," from Joseph P. McKey, History of Niagara University, Seminary of Our Lady of Angels, 1856-1931 (Niagara: Niagara University, 1931) 8, 10.
- ³⁴ Attributed to an Irish overseer in Clement Eaton, The Growth of Southern Civilization, 1790-1860, [1st] ed. (New York,: Harper, 1961) 64.
- ³⁵ From the *OED*: "Signify, v. *intr.* *U.S. slang* (chiefly *Blacks*'). To boast or brag; to make insulting remarks or insinuations." I am surprised that no one has ever connected this usage with the Irish, since they favor it as well. "Scots-Irish" may be a good example of a signifying word!
- ³⁶ Robert C. Healey, A Catholic Book Chronicle: The Story of P. J. Kenedy & Sons, 1826-1951 (New York,: Kenedy, 1951) 14.
- ³⁷ Jon W. Anderson and William B. Friend, The Culture of Bible Belt Catholics (New York: Paulist Press, 1995) 10.
- ³⁸ Cf., Cogley, Catholic America 28.
- ³⁹ Ernest Kirschten, Catfish and Crystal, [1st] ed. (Garden City, N.Y.,: Doubleday, 1960).

- ⁴⁰ Edward King and James Wells Champney, The Great South: a Record of Journeys in Louisiana, Texas, the Indian Territory, Missouri, Arkansas, Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, Virginia, West Virginia, and Maryland (Hartford, Conn.: American publishing company, 1875) 227-29.
- ⁴¹ Source: Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. Study 00003: Historical Demographic, Economic, and Social Data: U.S., 1790-1970. Anne Arbor: ICPSR
- ⁴² Source: U.S. Census data, 1850/1860, compiled from the Geostat Center at the University of Virginia Library. Any mathematical errors are my own!
- ⁴³ Roger Brooke Taney came from a line that traced its origins to Irish indentured servants brought to Maryland in the mid-seventeenth century. Taney was second-born, and because primogeniture laws still applied, he did not take over his family's tobacco plantation. The Baltimorean went to the bar instead—and the rest is history.
- ⁴⁴ James J. Hennesey, American Catholics : A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States (New York: Oxford University Press, 1981) 147.
- ⁴⁵ Kelly J. O'Grady, Clear the Confederate Way! : The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia, 1st ed. (Mason City, IA: Savas, 2000) 30.
- ⁴⁶ Emily Toth, Kate Chopin (New York: Morrow, 1990) 47.
- ⁴⁷ From the Library of Congress.
- ⁴⁸ The outermost visible streets on each side are the boundaries. Available, <http://genealogyinstlouis.accessgenealogy.com/kerrypatch.htm>
- ⁴⁹ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 111.
- ⁵⁰ Dennis Clark, "The South's Irish Catholics: A Case of Cultural Confinement." In Miller and Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture 201.
- ⁵¹ Adopted from Gleeson's *The Irish in the South*. Sources: Dodd and Dodd, Historical Statistics of the South, 1790-2970, 2, 6, 14, 18, 26, 34, 38, 46, 50, 54, 58; De Bow, ed., Statistical View of the United States: A Compendium of the Seventh Census, 117; Kennedy, Population of the United States in 1860, xxix.
- ⁵² Adopted from John C. Willis, 1860 Population Distribution of the Eleven Future Confederate States, Available: http://www.sewanee.edu/faculty/Willis/Civil_War/tables/ConfedPop1860.html.

- ⁵³ As many as 144,000 Irish may have fought for the Union. Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 154.
- ⁵⁴ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 6.
- ⁵⁵ Hennesey, American Catholics : A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States 58. Viewed at arm's length, it is clear that Irish American racism was a pawn that politicians used adroitly. Nativists, States-Righters, and recruiters—to name a few—exploited Irish racial ambition, and could count on their racist solidarity whenever there was rabble to be raised. Which is not to lay the blame on the moral turpitude of politicians, but rather to observe that political movements always require rank-and-file members to publicly support for their aims, and they cultivate heavily from classes of the uneducated poor.
- ⁵⁶ “The Bonnie Blue Flag” (*We are a band of brothers/And native to the soil,/Fighting for our liberty,/With treasure, blood, and toil*) was written by a secessionist Irishman, Harry McCarthy. “Dixie’s Land” is attributed to Daniel Decatur Emmett, an Irish-American from Ohio. And Innes Randolph set “Good Ole Rebel” to a tune believed to be an old Irish protest song.
- ⁵⁷ Randall M. Miller, Harry S. Stout and Charles Reagan Wilson, Religion and the American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998) 55.
- ⁵⁸ Edmund Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1962).
- ⁵⁹ Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White.
- ⁶⁰ Steven E. Woodworth, While God Is Marching On : The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers, Modern War Studies (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2001) 18.
- ⁶¹ Woodworth, While God Is Marching On : The Religious World of Civil War Soldiers 16-20.
- ⁶² In practice, the democratic spirit of American Catholics has tended to diversify opinion well beyond the borders of church teaching. But the issue is far from dead, as the recently contested nomination of Alabama Attorney General William Pryor shows.
- ⁶³ Cf., “A Church in Cultural Captivity,” in Miller and Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture.
- ⁶⁴ When they could manage it, southern Catholic religious leaders studiously avoided the slavery debate. They had good reason to be cautious. Truly a “wedge issue,” slavery had already fissured one Protestant denomination after another. James Andrew, a slaveholding Methodist Bishop, led the push for the Methodist Episcopal Church. The badly divided

Presbyterians held out until the war began. Then the pro-slavery Old School General Assembly broke off, giving the term “old school” its special register in black vernacular. Baptists’ congregational system predestined the regional fracture. Ryan gleefully notes each of these schisms in his defiant *A Catholic Convention of One*, as proof of the endless fragmentation of the “sects,” but he does not acknowledge that slavery troubled the conscience of American Catholicism. Roman Catholics would weather the storm, but so would Lutherans and Episcopalians.

⁶⁵ It was his brother who ordained Ryan.

⁶⁶ John Tracy Ellis, American Catholicism, 2d , rev. ed. (Chicago,: University of Chicago Press, 1969).

⁶⁷ Miller and Wakelyn, Catholics in the Old South : Essays on Church and Culture 17.

⁶⁸ Hennesey, American Catholics : A History of the Roman Catholic Community in the United States 145.

⁶⁹ Jean Baptiste Bouvier, Institutiones Theologicæ Ad Usus Seminariorum Auctore J.B. Bouvier (Paris: 1873). Bouvier was a carpenter-turned-Bishop and highly regarded reformer of moral theology.

⁷⁰ Augustin Verot, General Catechism of the Christian Doctrine on the Basis Adopted by the Plenary Council of Baltimore. For the Use of Catholics of the Diocese of Savannah & Vicariate Apostolic of Florida, with Slight Additions and Modifications (Augusta: Ga., Printed by J.T. Paterson, 1864). Only the Library of Virginia still holds a copy of this rare wartime document. All shrilling aside, Verot was not a dull man; in the same column, he predicts the end of nation-state borders, an idea that political scientists would take far more seriously in the twentieth century.

⁷¹ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 36.

⁷² A. Oakey Hall, The Manhattaner in New Orleans; or, Phases of "Crescent City" Life (New York: J.S. Redfield, 1851).

⁷³ Toth, Kate Chopin 28.

⁷⁴ From Edward King’s *The Great South* (1875).

⁷⁵ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 58.

⁷⁶ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 59.

⁷⁷ From Edward King’s *The Great South* (1875).

⁷⁸ René Pol Nevils and Deborah George Hardy, Ignatius Rising : The Life of John Kennedy Toole (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001) 9.

CHAPTER II

Furling the Sacred Banner: Father Abram Ryan's Catholic Lost Cause

Southern thought must be a distinct thought—not a half thought, but a whole thought.—George Fitzhugh, “Southern Thought”

He inherited from his parents, in its most poetic and religious form, the strange witchery of the Irish temper.—*The Catholic Encyclopedia* (1914), on Father Abram Ryan

Cabalistic Christianity, which is Catholic Christianity, and which has prevailed for 1,500 years, has received a mortal wound, of which the monster must finally die. Yet so strong is his constitution, that he may endure for centuries before he expires.—John Adams, letter to Thomas Jefferson, July 16, 1814, from James A. Haught, ed., *2000 Years of Disbelief*

Protestantism is disintegrating, dissolving away, dying.—Father Ryan, *A Catholic Convention of One* (141)

In this world we have seen the Roman Catholic power dying...for many centuries. Many a time we have gotten all ready for the funeral and found it postponed again, on account of the weather or something.... Apparently one of the most uncertain things in the world is the death of a religion.—Mark Twain, *Following the Equator: A Journey Around the World*



Illustration 6. Detail from a map of Saint Louis, dated 1848, by J.M. Kershaw

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The Lives of the Saints of the Confederacy is a title that exists only as a fiction of history. Still, we can imagine it, and its principals would not be so difficult to catalogue: Lee, Stonewall, Forrest, and so on. And it exists in part because the story has been foretold: Davis suffered Yankee imprisonment and torture after Pontius Lincoln (or Father Abraham, depending on your perspective) surrendered him to the people's will; he died and was buried; Varina attended to his body, etc etc. And if the hagiography of the Lost Cause were published and made regular, the priestly Father Ryan would likely be *the* patron saint.

Accounts of Ryan's life have the imaginative, slightly ecstatic quality of saintly tracts. Most of what is known about him comes by way of scattered tribute rather than serious scholarship, and the facts of his life must be retrieved from the fog that surrounds his cult of personality and the Lost Cause fog that he helped spread.¹ His personality and his contribution to southern culture sustain the interest in him, much more so than the literary quality of his work, which, to modern tastes, is banal and overly sentimental. Ryan's literary oblivion is in some cases richly deserved; his cultural oblivion, less so. The journalistic vehicle of Ryan's social commentary merits rediscovery by scholars of history and literature alike, and there are some gems to be plucked from Ryan's creative work, too. More than ever before, a critic presumes license to examine both.²

Oscar Wilde's sublimely chiastic observation in *The Picture of Dorian Gray* applies: "An inferior poet... lives the poetry that he cannot write. The others write the poetry that they dare not realize." H.L. Mencken's condemnation of southern intellectual sterility has been met with the defense that southerners are more apt to do than to think. Ryan was a skillful polemicist with a serrated intellect, but he was also a man of action, a restless *doer*

whose life recorded the difficult career of a faith and a southern subculture. He lived much of the poetry he could not write.

That a Confederate Roman Catholic priest should be a leading ideologue and formulator of the Lost Cause seems, on its face, absurd to the WASP's nest conception of southern history ascendant in the twentieth century. This view has all but occluded Catholic involvement in shaping southern culture, particularly in the nineteenth century. Yet Ryan was not exceptional. Contrary to expectation, as a percentage of the total chaplainry, there were more Confederate priests serving the South than the North. Almost to a man, Irish Catholic priests in the South sided passionately with the South, and the Democratic laity over which they presided cast their lot with the Confederacy. Nevertheless, Catholic denotes "outsider" within the settled narrative of southern history, and his celebrity comes as an indigestible fact. Something there is that makes Ryan elusive to the very last.

Perhaps that is because from the very beginning, one finds the record riddled with outright contradictions, misinformation, and uncertainties. Hence this chapter concerns itself largely with constructing a reliable biography of a writer who has elicited new attention with the dedication of an electronic archive devoted to his work. As one commentator put it, rather drolly, Ryan was "... a mystical character who appeared and disappeared throughout the conflict." As Ryan apotheosized into a folk hero, the tale ultimately evolved that he had participated in 52 battles and 40 skirmishes.³ If accounts of Ryan's life are taken at face value, one would be forced to conclude that he could pop up in several places at once.

He seems to have managed just such a trick for his birth.

Many biographers give Ryan's place of birth as Norfolk or even Ireland, and his association with Mobile, where he partly retired himself, led one estimable historian and

southern literary scholar to refer to the Confederate “from Mobile.”⁴ But the weight of the evidence and church records suggest that he was born in Hagerstown, Maryland, on February 5, 1838. Irish-born bishop Denis J. O’Connell felt compelled to leave a kind of affidavit “before passing away,” stating that his acquaintance Rev. Hugh McKeefry had made Ryan’s acquaintance when they heard from Father Ryan “firsthand” that he had been born in Hagerstown. (O’Connell did in fact die less than two years later). One would hope that a priest’s word, and a bishop’s message before dying, would be trustworthy.⁵

There may have been a grain of truth to Ryan’s association with Norfolk, as is often the case in oral tradition. The date of their immigration has not been established, but the family may have lived in Norfolk—with its attractive new Catholic Church—for a time before going to Hagerstown.⁶ Like many Irish Catholic immigrants to the South, they faced the challenge of maintaining their faith in a new country where priests, not to say churches, were few and far between. A community of independent-minded Catholics lived in Norfolk, comprised largely of Irish shipyard workers. Drawing on “a series of learned, but tedious disquisitions,” the predominantly Irish trustees asserted their right to nominate pastors and even Bishops.⁷ This initiated a minor Catholic republicanism crisis, necessitating the Archbishop’s intercession to prevent them from “electing” their own pastor in 1819.⁸ Some accounts describe Matthew Ryan, Sr., as a peddler who catered to Irish diggers, and the itinerant nature of his early work might well have taken the family from town to town.

Or the family may have moved to Norfolk after Hagerstown, where unsubstantiated family lore places Abraham, Sr., as an overseer, a job commonly available to Irish immigrants in the South. Regardless, some of the confusion surely stems from the fact that Ryan himself slanted his birthplace to suit his ends. Based on the testimonials of those who

knew him, Ryan sometimes stated his birthplace as Norfolk, and sometimes Hagerstown, depending on his audience. For example, in an 1875 lecture concerning “Great Men of the South,” Ryan mentioned Norfolk-born Patrick Henry in the same breath as “Virginia, where my own cradle was rocked.”⁹ As every good Catholic knows, there are sins of commission and omission, and somehow the omissions seem more venial.

It would not be Ryan’s only such peccadillo. An eyewitness account had Ryan at Gettysburg, “riding in the front ranks to the charge, ‘and he was saying the rosary,’” but McKey points out that records show very “clearly that on those very days he was in Peoria marrying and baptizing.”¹⁰ There is no evidence that Ryan himself promoted this mythmaking, but neither does he seem to have gone out of his way to discourage it. When La Salle Pickett interviewed Ryan after the war for her book on southern writers, she asked him if he had considered writing a poem about Pickett’s Charge at Gettysburg. Ryan passed up this opportunity to explain that he had not even been present. Instead, and perhaps with an eye toward the underpinnings of his literary reputation, he elusively replied, “Every flower that blooms on that field is a poem far greater poem than I could write.”¹¹

Ryan’s reaching for Norfolk stretch says a great deal about how he formulated his identity. He lectured widely in the North toward the end of his life, in places where audiences would find Hagerstown easier to accept, since it was free, if just barely, from the taint of southern rebellion.¹² Back “home,” Norfolk evoked instant name cachet and the luster of First Family lore among fellow southerners.

What’s in a name? For Ryan, it was a complicated matter. He was baptized at Saint Mary’s Church in Hagerstown on June 4, 1838. Church records record his full name and his baptismal name—in ecclesiastical Latin, of course—as “Matheus Abraham, Ryan, Mathei”

(“Mathei,” son of Matthew).¹³ It was only the first naming. His family called him Abraham, probably to distinguish him from his father. His name changed again, in the eyes of the Catholic Church: Matthew Abraham Ryan, Jr., was renamed Abraham Joseph Ryan, upon his confirmation.¹⁴ Still later, after his ordination, it would not do for a secessionist to share the name “Father Abraham” in common with Abraham Lincoln, so he went by Abram instead. That seems the best explanation for his settled name. Like so much of his identity, he had a hand in crafting it. In choosing to go by *Father* Ryan later in life, he asserted his identity boldly, since many priests before him had preferred the more anonymous (and Protestant) “Mister.”¹⁵ Ryan’s choice of title reflected decisions at once personal, political, and ecclesiastical.

Abram Ryan was just two years old when his family headed to the border country in Missouri—only to land in the South. Excepting Saint Louis, which made modest claims at civilization, most of Missouri was truly *beyond the pale*—an appropriate phrase that goes back to the 14th century, when the parts of Dublin under English rule were fenced in (e.g., surrounded by palings). From 1840 until 1846 the Ryans lived in Salt River, a settlement north of Saint Louis not far from Hannibal on the banks of the Mississippi. To the west sat New London, the diminutive Ralls county seat. This was rural living, even by the standards of the day. Hannibal had been founded in 1819, and the population climbed to an anemic 2020 in 1850. Hannibal’s most famous resident left in 1853 at the emancipated age of eighteen. One wonders if Ryan ever made passing acquaintance with the Clemens boy, a few miles upriver, and three years his senior.

Regardless, the Ryans could easily have mistaken their new town for a southern village. The Mississippi River served as a conduit for slavery in regions far flung from the

Deep South, as it carried the culture along with the people. Between fifteen and twenty-four percent of Ralls County's citizens were slaves in 1860.¹⁶ Slaveholding strongholds branched off along the Missouri River tributary and transected the state. Thus the counties coterminous with the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers in that corner of the state came to be known as "Little Dixie," and that is where the Ryans found a roost.

The residents of Little Dixie faced South in their agriculture, their roots, their trade, and even their toleration of violence. In the 1850s, about 75 percent of Missourians came of southern stock.¹⁷ These migration folkways were well defined. The 1860 census revealed that of 431,397 Missourians born out of state, 273,500 hailed from slave holding states, mostly of the upper south. When proslavery southern Baptists split their convention from their abolitionist brethren in the North, the Missouri Baptist General Association followed suit.

At the same time, northern settlers were making homes in Kansas and pushing into outlying Missouri. Kansas settlers dubbed their poor white southern neighbors "pukes," a derisive precursor to "rednecks." At base, most ideologies require simple opposites, and the rhetoric quickly took on the same sectional dimensions as the familiar debates of the East Coast. Some recognized the baiting for what it was, and some at least had a sense of humor about it. Journalist William Phillips cast Pukes as Frontier Wannabes, and felt that sloth was their defining quality. "Deer hunting was for them a science, coon-hunting purely a business affair." A *New York Tribune* reporter sent back this wicked grotesque: "Imagine a fellow, tall slim, but athletic, with yellow complexion, hairy faced, with a dirty flannel shirt, red or blue, or green, a pair of commonplace, but dark-colored pants, tucked into an uncertain altitude by a leather belt, in which a dirty-handled bowieknife is stuck, rather ostentatiously,

an eye slightly whiskey-red, and teeth the color of a walnut.”¹⁸ The jabs, viewed from this expanse of history, are clearly changeless. The Pukes ye have with ye always.

The issue was serious, though. A microcosmic culture-war was brewing, and it precipitated violence years in advance of Sumter’s cannons. Despite the rhetorical posturing, loyalties were more complicated than in Dixie proper. Ironically, many wealthy Missourian slaveholders hitched their wagon to the Union, hoping that the federal government would stabilize the region. The “pukes,” more often than not, were caught in the middle of guerilla violence. Many were ambivalent about slavery or opposed it, but became “secesh,” particularly after Federal troops forcefully occupied Missouri.¹⁹ A significant minority of Missourians came to see themselves as displaced Southrons in a pro-Union majority, and given the geography of their outpost, they had reason to circle the wagons. The more galvanized Missourians naturally defected to the Confederacy when Civil War broke out. Missouri had already tasted of the national conflict, justifying her reputation as “a deadly laboratory” for the Civil War. The seething internecine conflicts and poisonous political invective of Missouri politics shaped a violent environment that surely shaped Ryan.

After Salt River, the family moved to the city. Matthew Ryan reportedly opened a general store on North Third/Broadway Street in Saint Louis. If so, it likely marked an improvement in his estate, although two of the Ryan’s children may have died shortly after the family’s arrival in Saint Louis. Young Abraham was enrolled in a crowded, pay-as-you-go Christian Brothers school, a proletariat educational option if ever there was one. Father David J. Daugherty recollected in 1876 that the “school for boys was in the three-story building at the back of the church. The roll must have been large for the classrooms were quite crowded.”²⁰ Louis B. James reports that Ryan admitted that his “monthly report, as

called out in the study hall, read always thus: 'Position in class, first; diligence, so so; conduct, so so.'"²¹ Still, for recent immigrants to the United States, and Irish Catholic immigrants at that, the Ryans were making out fine.

And the Catholics had been trailblazing. Vincentians from Kentucky founded St. Mary's of the Barrens Seminary. The first college founded west of the Mississippi River was chartered in 1823. Thirteen-year-old Abram Ryan entered the preparatory seminary there on September 16, 1851.²² (His brother David would follow suit). His earliest portraits show him wearing the long hair that he kept, rebelliously, for his entire life.



Illustration 7. Ryan in his novitiate days.

He went through the prescribed paces: entering the novitiate, pronouncing his vows, and subsequently receiving tonsure. He was ordained at the canonical age of twenty-two, on September 12, 1860. His first mission was, happily enough, at the Barrens. But when his provincial ordered him to Niagara to teach, Abram Ryan was struck by the first of a series of mysterious illnesses. Ryan's strident politics would not have played well to the unanimously pro-Union faculty at Niagara. They probably invited him to rethink his position, and he left. Serial reassignments followed, and in 1861 he asked for a dispensation from his vows to the Vincentians. The weight of the evidence suggests that his sectional loyalties were being stifled, and that Ryan had made himself a *persona non grata*. He felt misused, and complained in his letter, "It seems impossible for me to agree or to sympathize with my

superiors...”²³ No doubt the Missourian, with a head full of Little Dixie invective, made quite a splash. Ryan had sharp elbows, and for an authoritarian priest, he had a real problem with authority. Perhaps the Vincentians had hoped to reign him in before real trouble began, but with rumors of the war, the ever-willful young man was champing at the bit to return to his chosen section.

Back at the Barrens, the faculty tended to side with the Union, whereas the students were divided. The tenuous situation was similar to the fledgling “university” of Notre Dame, at the time styled as a disciplinary stronghold for coltish sons, which simply disallowed any partisan discussion of war issues. The rule applied equally to students and faculty.²⁴ When war broke out, students slipped away to fight for both sides.

Likewise, church policy setters sanctioned neutrality, but their flock had other plans. An unstated element of *realpolitik* came into play: an authoritarian, expansionist American church, already politically precarious within the republican framework, could little afford to choose sides. Dublin-born Archbishop Peter Kenrick, who ordained Ryan, sided with his home folks but kept officially neutral, and when priests felt tugged into service on either side, he left the letters requesting leave unopened. The rising star of the Saint Louis diocese was young John B. Bannon, who left County Roscommon in 1853 and straightaway went to work for Kenrick in the main cathedral. The city was already on a war-footing, and after Jayhawkers made fresh incursions in Western Missouri in the fall of 1860, Bannon at once donned militia blue and mustered with Captain John Kelly’s men downtown. He was clearly a Christian soldier. In such an environment, Ryan might have gotten as much bellicose indoctrination in church as anywhere else. Bannon’s meteoric rise through the ranks might

well have inspired Abram Ryan, if he met him during the family visits of his seminary years; the Irish immigrant was just six years his senior.

Until recently, almost nothing was known of Ryan's wartime movements. Happily, Don Beagle's pathbreaking archival work has helped reclaim Ryan's wartime career. His research expands on the details of Ryan's wartime career, demythologizes the priest's activities, and perhaps most important, provides an entry point for other scholars. Prior to Beagle's enquiry, Ryan was believed to have been a circuit-riding priest in Missouri during the early years of the war. Based on Beagle's careful reconstruction of events, Ryan was teaching in Cape Girardeau, tucked into a bend on the Mississippi in Little Dixie, and he seems to have been, in Beagle's phrase, the "resident Rebel." Word was coming from downriver that Confederate chaplains were sorely needed, as correspondence from pro-Confederate Archbishop Jean Marie Odin attests. Far from being "out of the loop," Beagle concludes, Ryan was in a prime position to receive "multiple invitations, directly or indirectly, to serve in the army of Northern Virginia."²⁵ When Ryan requested leave for illness, his superiors smelled a cover story, to which he alludes obliquely: "They rebuked me for working in an underhand manner."

The upstart was sailing close to the wind and he knew it. Eventually, he was released from his vows. In an age where such promises were treated with mortal seriousness, Ryan's departure sent a ripple through the order and occasioned his confreres' tears, as well as his own. But fame awaited him. Irby Morgan, the sister-in-law of Confederate General John Hunt Morgan, describes an incident in which Ryan shared the stage with General Beauregard in Nashville on February 3, 1862.²⁶ Two months later, on April 10, 1862, Ryan requested to

be released from his Vincentian vows, ending his days as a gagged confederate and opening the way for free-lance service.



Illustration 8. A meeting of Irish minds on Lookout Mountain.²⁷

Once he slipped the tether, he probably ranged freely in the ensuing months. The only documentary evidence that places him positively is an article noting that Ryan appeared at Missionary Ridge, written by a British journalist identified only as "M.G.B." Ryan was photographed—purportedly at the battle site—with a man identified as John Mitchel, the

celebrated Irish exile. The man in the photograph does indeed look like Mitchel, but the photograph has not been authenticated.

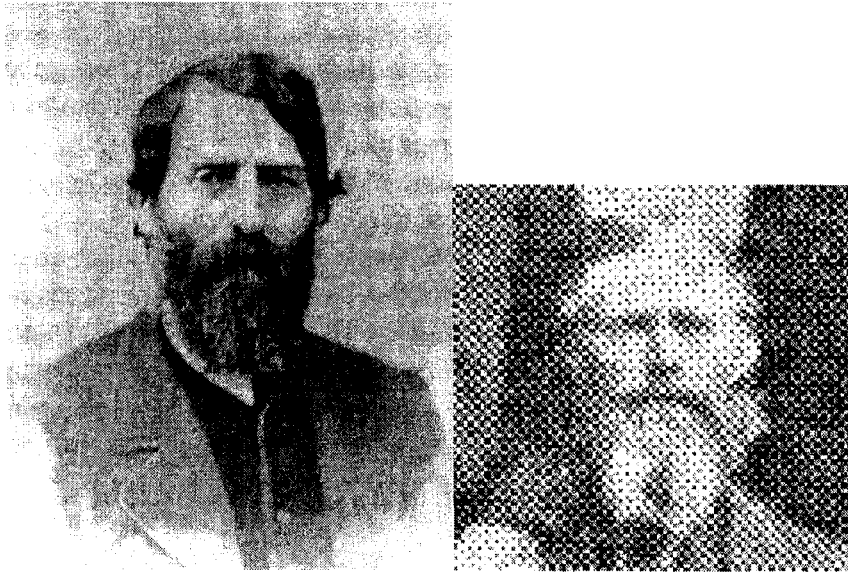


Illustration 9. John Mitchel, as he appeared in 1860, and in later dispatch.²⁸

What are the odds? Students of Civil War history come to know the country on more intimate terms. It was, indeed, a small world: the population of the Union states was around twenty million, and the people of the eleven Confederate states numbered nine million, of which nearly four million were slaves. The Irish census of April 1861 placed the population at 5,798,967.²⁹ To put that in perspective, Ireland was home to a population not much larger than the white population of the Confederacy during the Civil War. To some degree, it is possible to reconstruct the Irish Catholic nexus of the Civil War. It soon becomes apparent that a real Catholic network existed, and that its circuits were often connected by priests.³⁰ The point is brought home tangibly by the wartime journals of clergy such as Louis-Hippolyte Gache.³¹ In the smallish, tight-knit Irish American community, the Irish sought each other out on the battlefield, and priests served as obvious meeting points.

How came those men to have their picture made? Likely it was through word of mouth and mutual contacts within the nexus. Mitchel's writings and his role during the Civil War have excited considerable interest lately, and his almost incredible travels bear further explanation. The Irishman was always one step ahead of his jailors. As a young nationalist, he distinguished himself by taking a lonely stand and advocating armed rebellion against British rule. Things soon got hot for him. He was clapped into irons and exiled to Van Diemen's Land. En route he completed his *Jail Journal, or Five Years in British Prisons Commenced aboard the Shearwater* (1854), in which he contemplated the parallels between the condition of Irish serfs and Brazilian slaves.³² Because he later advocated "earnestly the re-opening of the African slave trade in the interest both of blacks and whites," it is easy to forget that he was a true radical, with an Irish sense of fair play. He implicitly accepted the endless human brutality of might making right, but he was also aware that the bottom rail might be on top one day: "The moment the black and brown people are able, they will have a clear right to exchange positions with the Portuguese race."³³ He also decried English hypocrisy in abolishing slavery at home while profiting from it in all corners of the world. In 1853 he made good his escape to America, where he reconnected with his brother-in-spirit, fellow exile Thomas Meagher. The two founded a paper in New York called *The Citizen*, and the circulation soon swelled to a remarkable 50,000.

Newly arrived at New York, Mitchel stepped on the toes of Irish-born Archbishop John Joseph Hughes. Mildly delighted, Mitchel acknowledged that his views were "the subject of much surprise and general rebuke."³⁴ His parents were Protestant Dissenters within Northern Ireland's Presbyterian majority; he was fearless in his antagonisms. In 1857, when Mitchel moved from New York to Tuckaleechee, Tennessee, he announced

imperiously, “I have emancipated myself from much blatherumskite.” He was not, however, finished with muckraking. Unfortunately, Tuckaleechee was at the opposite remove from cosmopolitan, leading him to complain that the intellectual company was “worse than VDL [Van Diemen’s Land].”³⁵

The transplanted Irishman played at being a gentleman farmer among the rustics, and knew he was a little preposterous. He enjoyed it, and he liked the celebrity of his new cause. He wrote his sister in 1859, “As for me, I am ‘saving the South’ with all my might—indeed so violently, that a great part of the South (besides the whole North) thinks me mad.”³⁶ Mitchel was one of those who counted himself immune from criticism because he refused to accept it. When Harriet Stowe’s brother Henry Ward Beecher attacked Mitchel’s positions the Irishman-lately-Southron brushed off the critique as “abolitionist cant.” He premised his intellectual defense of slavery partly on the abuses of the international “capital” system. Indeed, his *Jail Journal* anticipates Gramsci’s Marxist ruminations in the *Prison Notebooks*, proving that Mitchel’s sheer volatility made him an ideologue for all seasons.³⁷

Mitchel welcomed southern rebellion and he reaped the whirlwind. It stripped him of much, beginning with his friend Meagher, whose about-face led him to fight for the Union. The war took two of his sons and cost the other an arm. According to the unnamed British correspondent at Missionary Ridge, he was “strong of stature, with eyes whose darkness could flash with defiance, and on his lips, scorn had made permanent abode.” Mitchel was “cold and reserved” at their meeting, because “he had just offered on the altar of the cause he espoused, his son.”³⁸ He had been volunteering around Richmond in the ambulance core that summer.

The two would have had much to talk about, since their views, and their talents, agreed so well. In the final days when Richmond had its own White House, the *Richmond Enquirer* served as its propaganda mouthpiece. Jefferson Davis vetted Mitchel for the editorship. Eventually, the tempestuous Irishman grew disenchanted with Davis, who he believed was too soft on Yankee depredations. As the parched earth campaign dragged on, Mitchel wanted to see the Confederates fight fire with fire. He surrendered his watch to switch to the Richmond *Examiner*; a few years later, the merged *Enquirer & Examiner* would plank loudly for the Ku Klux Klan.³⁹ The *Examiner*'s editor, Edward A. Pollard, coined a phrase for which the culture thirsted: "The Lost Cause" first gained currency in a tract titled, *The Lost Cause: A New Southern History of the War of the Confederates* (1866).

Neither Mitchel nor Ryan knew when to shut up. Mitchel had another chance to revisit Jefferson Davis—this time in clammy Fortress Monroe. Grant himself issued the warrant for Mitchel's arrest, after the incorrigible Irishman resumed his seditious pro-southern campaign on the pages of the New York *Daily News* after hostilities ceased. Eventually New York Democrats and Fenians bailed him out, "heroically unchastened," quite the same condition in which Ryan emerged from the war. In the very last issue of *The Morning Star* that Ryan edited, Mitchel had just lately passed away, and the paper ran a long-winded tribute to the unreconstructed Irishman, twice a nationalist. Major J.H. New, the orator at Saint Patrick's hall, told the Hibernian Association members present, "I say nothing here of his literary labors in this time..." Of course, he immediately does say some things, and concludes, "These will be appropriately noticed by the critics and scholars."⁴⁰ Scholarly interest in Mitchel has spiked recently, and 130 years later, New's prediction is fulfilled.

Mitchel is no mere sidekick, or sidetrack, for that matter. He is a pathway to the mentality of Ryan and the coterie of rabid Irish Catholic Confederate writers. Apparently the unnamed author who wrote about them did not share their southern partisan views. He notes that the Confederates “have no pretensions to military discipline,” and praises Grant’s soldiery and command. To this he tacks on a fascinating critique of the southern Irish, who were perhaps succumbing to the South’s Protestant hegemony:

And I may remark here that in the southern army I met hundred with purely Irish names, but they had all forsaken the faith. This is unaccountable. I met my countrymen in every condition in the North, in the large cities, in the fastness of the pine forests, in the plains of Montana, in the depth of the mines, in the sunny slopes of the Pacific, in danger, in temptation, remote from the friendly counsel of co-religionists, away from the help and guidance of their priesthood, and yet in all and through all, they clung with unshaken tenacity to the faith. Why have they become recreant in the Southland?⁴¹

The answer, of course, was that they were a deeply submerged minority, but the statement is most intriguing, since it tends to support the theory that many southerners tailored their Irish identity to suit the place. The British journalist was apparently a subject of the crown—the clear implication is that he was Irish. Unfortunately, he only initials his dispatch, and his identity has yet to be established. The article concludes with an all-too-coincidental encounter on the battlefield between Ryan and a nun who was ministering to the fallen. One of the victims, it turns out, is the nun’s Irish-born brother, Miles Driscoll. Kissing her brother’s “pallid lips, she hears his last words: ‘Mother is waiting for me at the Old Boreen and little Willie, who was slept so many year in the old churchyard is with her, and they are beckoning me to come. Pray for me, Eileen, kiss me, for I must go.’” “Resting his head on her bosom,” he passes away, leaving Ryan to exclaim, “Oh, Mother Ireland, how gloriously your fame is earned by those soldiers of the sword and of the Crucifix.” The piece is so thickly emplotted that it ends with a flagrant, “THE END.” The sentimentalism cloaks

a culture in full flight from the results of its militant ideologies. It is as if the soft prose were meant to counter the muscular action of wartime and the resulting carnage. It is quite possible that the author was reworking old reportage to suit the tastes of a later audience.

Common sense indicates that there is some serious invention going on here, and one is tempted to dismiss the entire column as the work of a fabulist. Perhaps more incredible than the story itself is that real events substantiate it. Two of Ryan's letters in the Tennessee State Archives enquire after the health of the Driscoll family and children, and "little Michael Driscoll" in particular. A "Sr. Catherine Driscoll" is listed among the Sisters of Charity who left Emmitsburg, Md., in June of 1861, to serve as nurses (there are anecdotes of bedridden soldiers who were terrified by their wimples). Although her brother calls her "Eileen," in the article, the discrepancy can be explained by the common practice of nuns' receiving a saint's name for emulation. No wonder Ryan harbored special feeling for a southern Irish Catholic soldier whose older sister, like his, was a nun.

Thus records confirm that a nun whose surname was Driscoll served in the vicinity. Scenes of families reunited by death on the battlefield are common enough to Civil War history. It seems likely that the journalist embellished on a real-life tragedy—or perhaps something that Ryan told him. We simply do not know, but the corroborating details help rehabilitate the article's significance and credibility.⁴²

One other piece of evidence adduces the report's essential veracity. A lecture that Mitchel delivered after returning to Ireland was published in an 1872 volume, replete with Ryan's poem, "Erin's Flag."⁴³ The date is important because the poem was not anthologized until 1879. Either the poem had appeared in another outlet—possible, since many of Ryan's

poems were printed in sundry newspapers, here and there—or Ryan passed it along to Mitchel himself.⁴⁴

In any event, the battle at Missionary Ridge must have shocked Ryan's conscience. Bragg's anticipated Confederate triumph ended in the horrific Battle Above the Clouds. Confronted with this vision of hell, his brother's death must have played heavily on his mind. David Ryan emulated his brother to the point of trying his hand at poetry and enrolling at Niagara University. And if Ryan had any say in the matter, he clearly would have counseled his brother to do what he longed to do himself, and join the boys in gray. David Ryan left Niagara at the end of August, 1862, and enlisted in Company K, 8th Kentucky Cavalry, 3rd Division of the Army of Tennessee, on 10 September, 1862. In October of the same year, Abram Ryan was placed under arrest, according to press reports, for unspecified "seditious utterances."⁴⁵

David Ryan was killed in action on April 11, 1863, near Monticello, Kentucky. It was probably some months before Abram Ryan learned of his demise.⁴⁶ It remains unclear to which battalions Abram Ryan attached himself. There is good circumstantial evidence that Ryan had the opportunity and motive for joining a Louisiana Battalion; the Army of Northern Virginia is another likely possibility. There is, however, no positively probative evidence that he served with either.

In the chaotic months leading up to the war's end, Ryan wrote his mother and sister from Edgefield, Tennessee, on September 19, 1864, mentioning that he had been on the move lately. His next letter places him temporarily in Nashville (dated April 7, 1865), relates an incident about a train attacked by "guerillas," and explains that he is bound for Knoxville.⁴⁷ Ryan served the Immaculate Conception parish—named for the official

declaration of the doctrine in 1854, quite appropriately for a church that had sprung up seemingly from thin air in Knoxville—from May, 1865, until July of 1867, when he left to accept an appointment at Saint Patrick’s parish in Augusta, Georgia.

Ryan biographers have suggested, conventionally, that it was during this time that he edited *The Pacificator* at Bishop Augustin Verot’s invitation. This is almost certainly mistaken. The confusion seems to stem from Ryan’s later association with the *Banner of the South*. That paper premiered on March 21, 1868, signaling the launch of Ryan’s journalistic avocation. The banner of his Lost Cause mouthpiece not too subtly flashed Ryan’s *patrias*, as it depicted double devotion to *Religio* and *Patria*, with a widow mourning over the grave of country.

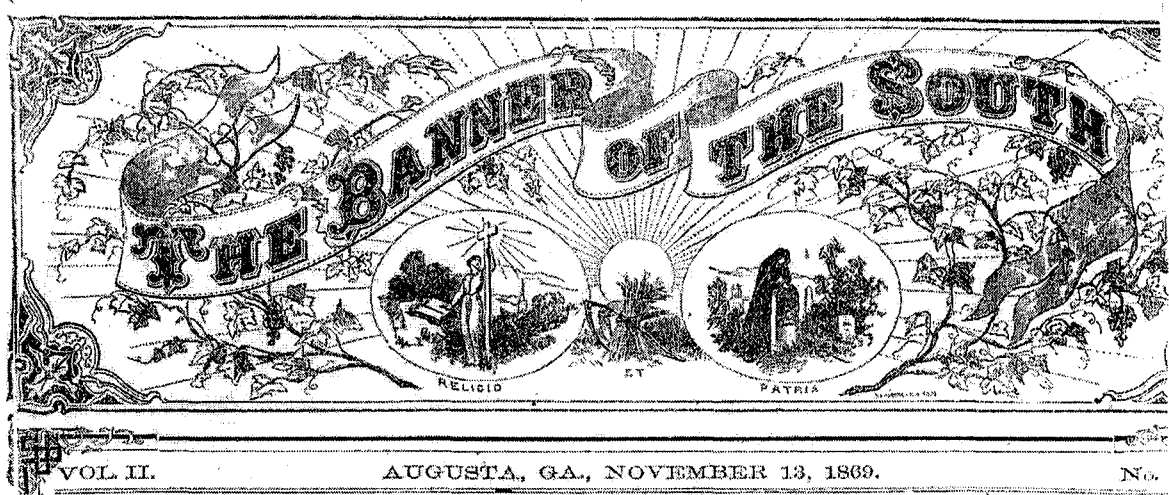


Illustration 10. *The Banner’s* iconic approach to politics.

Journalism agreed with Ryan’s sermonic drive, his gifts, and his verbal virtuosity. He had a journalist’s knack for turning out the well-tempered sentence. For example, on the mutability of human affairs and the constancy of his Church, Ryan wrote, “The tempest sweeps over her, and she is no more disturbed, than is the sunlit summit of quiet mountain-

peak, by the clouds that sweep under her crown.”⁴⁸ He revealed his wit in the constant stream of jokes, one-liners, puns, and acrostics that he ran in his paper. He did not hesitate to let “Pshaw!” stand as a complete sentence. And in the rare event that he was at a loss for words, he invented them. At a lecture in Washington he opined, “We are a nervous, neuralgic, go-aheadative people. We look back at old Europe and call it a snail, a fool. But are we not too fast?”⁴⁹

Bishop Augustin Verot kept an eye on Ryan’s stewardship of the *Banner*. At one point, Ryan padded a fund-raising circuit for Verot’s brain-child, a publicly-financed, separate-but-equal private school for African Americans in Georgia. Their efforts met with ridicule and the scorn of Protestant clergy. Verot biographer Michael Gannon suggests that the Frenchman was in a wrestling match with Protestants for the souls of black folk, but he also ascribes a measure of racial rapprochement to the failed plan.

Eventually the two parted company, perhaps in point of the brewing papal infallibility controversy. Ryan had always taken the pope’s authority as a *fait accompli*, whereas the “Rebel Bishop” Verot lived up to his sobriquet. Verot wrote Ryan on June 19, 1868, to say that the *Banner*’s popularity “through the Diocese, and, indeed, throughout the whole South,” provided “a strong inducement” to use its columns as the Diocese’s official organ. But he cautioned Ryan not to take it too far. “For, although personally and individually, we may approve them [the paper’s political views], still, as the head of the Diocese, we keep aloof from all political strife, and address our flock only on matters which relate to the one thing necessary [the salvation of souls].”⁵⁰ It may have been a shot over the bow, pointedly using the royal “we.” Ryan ignored it, arrogating the paper to air his thoughts on all subjects, including infallibility, showing once again his knack for working around the edges of

systems. Apparently, Verot was not salved by another Ryan editorial, "Bishop Verot, A Great Man." The exact cause of the falling out remains undiscoverable, but it no doubt had much to do with the clash of two mighty personalities.⁵¹

Politics proved irresistible to Ryan. The salutatory message of the Banner's first issue plainly blends Lost Cause and Catholic principles. It is as much a manifesto as a statement of editorial scruples:

With no little diffidence in ourselves, but with a deep faith in the principles which we intend to maintain, and with a love fully as deep for the two sacred causes which we are proud to espouse, we send forth, to-day, "THE BANNER OF THE SOUTH," to do humble, yet faithful, duty in guarding the truths of Religion, and in defending the rights and interests of Native-land.

...Bullets may mangle flesh—spill blood—slay men—but they can never reach the vital principles for which men contend. These principles are beyond the range of musket and cannon. Battle-fields may be the burial-places of men—never of rights.

...The armies and government of the Confederacy were but the mortal flesh and blood of an immortal cause. They are gone—it is living. Nor steel, nor lead, could touch its life or take it away....

And yet, though we are thorough Catholics, bigotry is not a part of our religion—prejudice is no element of our faith. We love the truth deeply and dearly which we have learned from the Church, and on which rest all our hopes eternity, but we hate no man who differs from us.... We do not believe in bitter words—they always bear bitter fruit....⁵²

In 1870 the poet-priest journeyed to New Orleans. He began dividing his time between New Orleans and Mobile, lecturing in both places, and serving as an assistant in the Mobile cathedral at Bishop John Quinlan's sufferance.⁵³ He also tended to the sick during one of the periodic outbreaks of yellow fever. He had contributed sporadically to *The (New Orleans) Morning Star and Catholic Messenger* before agreeing to a more substantial commitment, beamingly announced in the edition of February 18, 1872: "Our readers will hear with unalloyed satisfaction that the name of Rev. Father A.J. Ryan will head our

columns next weeks as principal editor of this paper.” (The paper’s title comes from a traditional Catholic phrase for Mary, who, during the “night” of advent, heralded the morning of Christ’s arrival.) Ryan was prominently named editor-in-chief until April 18, 1875, when he formally announced his resignation.



Illustration 11. *The Morning Star's* engraving.



Illustration 12. Mary as the Morning Star, dispelling the demons of night.⁵⁴

Oral tradition seems to support that he dabbled in some sort of affair during these years, “unmistakably within the period from 1870 to 1877,” according to Ada Law. Law was in a good place to intercept the stories through the small-town southern grapevine, since she had contacts within living memory of Ryan when she wrote. This was the period when Ryan worked at the Mobile Cathedral, and Law notes that his appearance was more than usually disheveled at the end of his term, raising the specter of some sort of dissolution. It is tempting, but premature, to assume that scandal precipitated his reassignment to Saint Mary’s on the outskirts of town.

The woman for whom Ryan harbored a crush is unnamed in his relevant letters, which were reprinted by “Louis B. James,” a pseudonym taken by Sister Mary Dominic O’Brien (1846-1900) in *The Rosary* magazine. Why she published such a revealing correspondence is unknown. Equally strangely, Ryan heightened the intrigue by dropping hints in his poems and letters, as in this provocative passage from “A Christmas Chant”:

So on with the mystic song,
With its meaning manifold –
Two tones in every word,
Two thoughts in every tone;
In the measured words that move along
One meaning shall be heard,
One thought to all be told;
But under it all, to be alone –
And under it all, to all unknown –
As safe as under a coffin-lid,
Deep meanings shall be hid.
Find them out who can!
The thoughts concealed and unrevealed
In the song of the lonely man.

“Their Story Runneth Thus” offers another teaser:

Some day—some far off day—when I am dead,
You have the simple rhymings of two hearts,
And if you think it best, —the world may know
A love tale crowned by purest SACRIFICE.

Some of his poems do seem to chronicle an impossible or lost love, including “Nocturne,” “What? (To Ethel),” “A Reverie,” “A Christmas Chant,” “M***,” “Fragments from an Epic Poem,” and “Their Story Runneth Thus.” Ryan’s sentiments are directed to someone putatively named “Ethel” in some of them, “Ulaine,” in others, though Ryan elsewhere insisted that Ethel was his sister. The poems indicate that Ryan’s love predeceased him after a separation in early life. At this point, it would be overstepping to assume that Ryan’s crush was anything more than a flirtation—a tale of soulmates

consensually divided by their religious convictions. He may simply have been drawing on the stuff of Victorian sentimental tragedy, grafting on his own life a dimension of conventional pathos.

Ryan did have a way with women, though, and it is interesting how many of them he corresponded with who subsequently claimed his special affection. Knoxville's Mrs. Margaret A. Sedgwick, for example, may have been angling to enlarge her reputation as a daughter of the Confederacy when she proudly claimed that she had "held the candle, by the light of which [Ryan] wrote the lines of 'The Conquered Banner.'"⁵⁵ Mrs. Hannah P. Conroy also averred that Ryan read the poem to her for the first time in Clarksville, having gone to his room for several days on news of Lee's surrender.⁵⁶ Mrs. Agnes Jean Stibbes perhaps over-disclosed in an 1870 tribute when she wrote, "I have listened to words of kindness and admonition, addressed [from Ryan] to *me alone*; and this is not all. I have clasped his hand, gazed into the unfathomable depths of those clear blue eyes, seeing there a blending of the tenderest pity and almost superhuman love with the shadow of a deep sorrow.... Would that mine were the privilege of daily kneeling at his feet, and while his hand rests upon my bowed head, have him invoke God's blessing upon me."⁵⁷ No doubt Mr. Stibbes would have liked to clasp Father Ryan, too. Yet Ryan embraced his rapport with women and seems to have relished their company.⁵⁸

In the course of "Louis B. James" correspondence, Ryan offered more than one *nunc dimittis* pronouncing his spiritual readiness for death. In one of them he declared, "And when I am dead and gone, it may be known, but the grave wherein I rest will be pure as an altar." Whatever may have transpired, Ryan seems to be at peace with it.

Throughout his time in Mobile, Ryan lectured extensively for the benefit of his diocese. To a close-shorn sheep God gives wind by measure, and the priest always included “Reunited,” the crowd-pleasing poem of reconciliation, in his lectures. In 1878 a disagreement with Bishop Quinlan precipitated his retirement to a house called *Sea Rest* on the lonely gulf shore.⁵⁹ The following year Father Ryan’s *Poems* were published for the first time. He leaned on his laurels and began lecturing in earnest. He suffered from poor health throughout his life, and 1881 brought another bout of illness, which may have been rooted in depression. Ryan took a break from the grueling life of a peripatetic and traveled throughout Europe, where he paid the mandatory visit to Rome. He took another sabbatical to *Sea Rest* in 1882, where he wrote *A Crown for Our Queen*; a devotional that reflects the Victorian fascination with Mariolatry. He intended a companion work on the life of Christ to be called *A Crown for Our King*, but he never finished it. The last three years of his life were demanding ones; he had been appointed Almoner of the Discalced (literally, “shoeless”) Carmelites of New Orleans. But by 1885, his poor health seriously curtailed his travel.

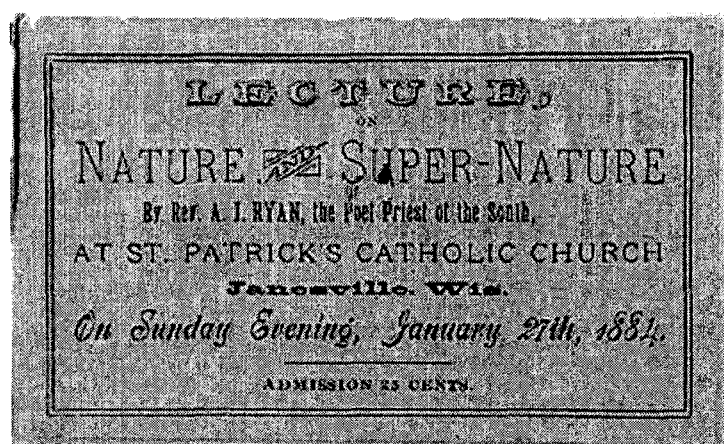


Illustration 13. An admission ticket for one of Ryan’s lectures.

He went down fighting. His last book, a temple-scourging, blistering assessment of the Presbyterian Convention held in Cincinnati (1885), was written while he convalesced “in

the mountains of Kentucky.” Working from newspaper reports, Ryan buzzsaws the meeting which, he claims, his doctor forbade him to attend. *A Catholic Convention of One* was Ryan’s last book, and he seems to have lost none of his vigor, though he describes himself as an “invalid,” and was writing during the Kentucky retreat when he died.⁶⁰

“If called upon,” Ryan asserted, rather brashly, “I think that I could prove the sect of Calvin to be a visible, passing, changing figure, under the holy name and form of Church, of the coming Anti-Christ.” In other words, he reversed the usual Protestant charges against the Whore of Babylon. In the same tract he accused Protestants waging a genocidal campaign against Native Americans. As to the Catholics in South America, Ryan admits, “Well do I know, that too many of these conquering soldiers, despite the Faith which teaches gentleness and love, were cruel, and too often fanatical”—but he maintains that they mingled with the natives rather than extirpating them.

Ryan must have composed in haste, because he arrived for his retreat at the Franciscan Monastery on March 22, 1886, and it was there that he died on April 24, 1886. As it happened, Ryan passed away on Holy Thursday, the day of the Last Supper, which is followed by a dark night of the soul. In Roman Catholic Church tradition, the bells are silenced, and after vespers, the altar is stripped. The night office is called *Tenebrae* (shadows). Ryan habitually worked into the late hours (“Midnight winds, I sigh with you!”). He describes his vigil in “God in the Night.”

Deep in the dark I hear the feet of God:
He walks the world; He puts His holy hand
On every sleeper—only puts His hand—
Within it benedictions for each one—
Then passes on; but ah! whene'er He meets
A watcher waiting for Him, He is glad.
(Does God, like man, feel lonely in the dark?)

The poem concludes,

Man—only man—the image of his God—
Let's God pass by when He walks forth at night.

One wonders whether Ryan heard the knock that evening. Whether he came out of the shadows is between him and his maker. He died as he lived—in the agony of anticipation, watchfully awaiting redemption, and, I would submit, at an appropriately premature hour. It was too soon to celebrate fully the risen Savior, who brought home the more jubilant message of the faith.

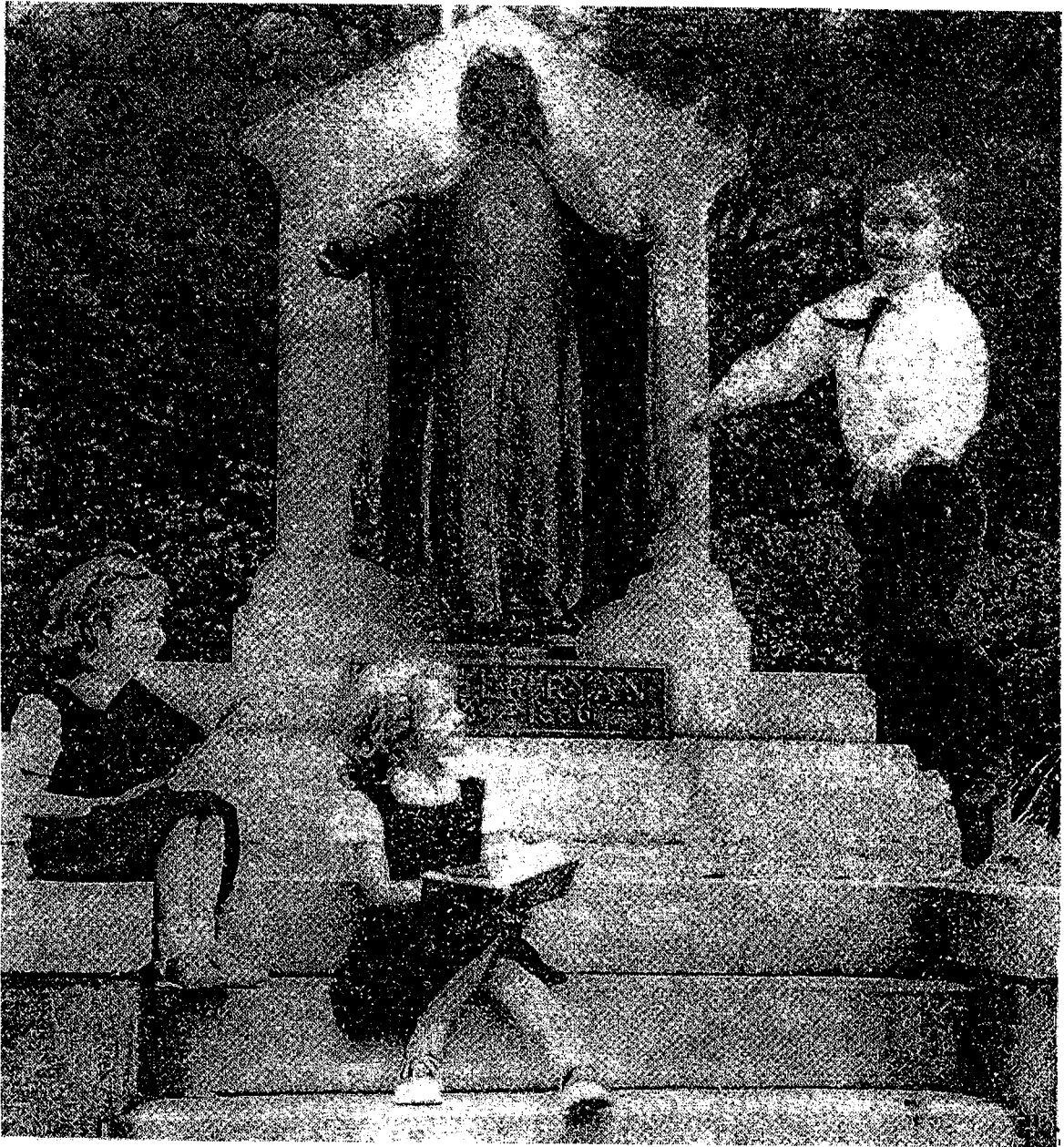


Illustration 14. Father Ryan suffers the children in a UDC-era statue.⁶¹

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Ryan's first duty was to his church. When John L. Rapier (Colonel Rapier to Mobilians) resolved to collect Ryan's poems, he resorted to soliciting manuscripts in an open letter published in southern papers. Hannis Taylor edited them and produced the final

volume. The preface, which is attributed to Ryan, objects to calling his “verses” “by the higher title of Poems.” They “were written at random—off and on, here, there, anywhere—just when the mood came, with little of study and less of art, and always in a hurry.” All modesty aside, Father Ryan succeeded, in his artlessness, in writing a number of underappreciated pieces that we should properly call poems.

As to his weaker poems, Gordon Weaver stated the case charitably in his introduction to *The Selected Poems of Father Ryan*: “Prosodically, Father Abram Ryan is a very regular poet in his practice. In a good many of his poems, to be sure, this creates negative effects. In Ryan’s work, this limitation is readily seen in an often monotonous stridency, a melodramatic crashing of rhythms that can, at its worst, irritate the reader’s ear as the fall of stress and unstress registers without subtlety, without equivocation of any sort.”

One example will suffice to illustrate that Ryan, at his worst, could have competed with J. Gordon Coogler.⁶² In this scene Ryan re-envisions the parting scene between his brother David and their mother (“In Memoriam (David J. Ryan, C.S.A.)”):

At the altar of their nation,
Stood that mother and her son,
He, the victim of oblation,
Panting for his immolation;
She, in priestess’ holy station,
Weeping words of consecration,
While God smiled his approbation,
Blessed the boy’s self-abnegation,
Cheered the mother’s desolation,
When the sacrifice was done.

It appears that the form controlled the surreal result of the stanza: the mother is configured as “priestess,” and the young soldier, in Ryan’s regrettably unforgettable phrase, stands “panting for his immolation.” Even if one allows for the sentimental register of the nineteenth century, the unintentional bathos is unarguably bad poetry.

The fact that much of Ryan's poetry is unexceptional, and some of it, substandard, has overshadowed his achievement. Take, for example, this poetic introit:

"TO-DAYS"

Brief while they last,
Long when they are gone
They catch from the past
A light to still live on.

Brief! yet I ween,
A day may be an age,
The poet's pen may screen
Heart-stories on one page.

Brief! but in them,
From eve back to morn,
Some find the gem,
Many find the thorn.

Brief! minutes pass
Soft as flakes of snow,
Shadows o'er the grass
Could not swifter go.

The archaic "ween" may signal Ryan's admiration of Robert Burns.⁶³ But the part of the poem that leaps out is the phrase "heart-stories." "Heart-stories" is based on Old Irish 'cride-sce/l', literally 'heart-story,' a phrase that recurs in Old Irish poetry. Perhaps Ryan had a volume of old poetry, or perhaps the phrasing was intuitive to him; it brings an appealingly ancient ring to the poem. Even if Ryan's rhyming effects were occasionally cloying, he was also capable of using his meter to great effect. For example, the couplet, "The death of men is not the death/Of rights that urged them to the fray," and these widely-circulated verses:

Life is a burden; bear it;
Life is a duty; dare it;
Life is a thorn-crown; wear it,
Though it break your heart in twain;
Though the burden crush you down;
Close your lips, and hide your pain,

First the Cross, and then, the Crown.

Another of Ryan's strengths was the skillful use of conceits to achieve great compression. Notice how these stanzas, and particularly the last line, encapsulate the life of Christ ("A Thought"):

It is a truth beyond our ken—
And yet a truth that all may read—
It is with roses as with men,
The sweetest hearts are those that bleed.

The flower which Bethlehem saw bloom,
Out of a heart all full of grace,
Gave never forth its full perfume
Until the cross became its vase.

Ryan was liberated by a lack of concern for his place among southern poets, and some of his poems show a preoccupation with themes more conventionally associated with "northern" poetry and the transcendentalists. Particularly salient is the way that Ryan breaks the southern mold by connecting nature quite openly with the divine. "Seen and Unseen" illustrates the point:

NATURE is but the outward vestibule
Which God has placed before an unseen shrine
The Visible is but a fair, bright vale
That winds around the great Invisible;
The Finite -- it is nothing but a smile
That flashes from the face of Infinite....

...And nature is His voice; who list may hear
His name low-murmured every-everywhere.
In song of birds, in rustle of the flowers,
In swaying of the trees, and on the seas
The blue lips of the wavelets tell the ships
That come and go, His holy, holy name.
The winds, or still or stormy, breathe the same;
And some have ears and yet they will not hear
The soundless voice re-echoed everywhere;
And some have hearts that never are enthralled
By the grand Hossannahs nature sings.

List! Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus! Without pause
Sounds sweetly out of all creation's heart,
That hearts with power to love may echo back
Their Sanctus! Sanctus! Sanctus! to the hymn.

Among early southern poets, only Sidney Lanier's "The Marshes of Glynn," written in 1878, could match this experiment. There are hints of Emerson, but the poem is distinctly Ryan's own; perhaps in recognition of this, Robert Bain classed Ryan with Emerson, Bryant, and Whittier.⁶⁴ Contrary to Weaver, as Don Beagle convincingly demonstrates, there is considerable subtlety in Ryan's prosody at times. Beagle notes the way that Ryan "mutes the dominant iambic meter" as the poem progresses, "just enough to hear subtler resonances in the language." Each reference to God is emplaced with "a strongly stressed syllable in a weak position: *His* word, *His* voice, *His* name, *His* holy."⁶⁵ Likewise, the concluding Sanctus, which, read aloud, brings a breathless, reverent quality to the verse. Form mirrors function wonderfully, seen and unseen, as the poem makes Ryan's point for him: "God hides in nature as a though doth hide/In humbly-sounding words; and as the thought/Beats through the lowly world like pulse of thought..." The poem is a richly literary conceit for the act of creation:

For nature is His word so strangely writ
In heav'n, in all the letters of the stars,
Beneath the stars in alphabets of clouds,
And on the seas in syllables of waves...

One of Ryan's more celebrated poems was the "March of the Deathless Dead." It seems likely that Ryan borrowed the memorable phrasing, "deathless dead." Some translations of Dante's *Inferno* use it, but John Moultrie's "The Hall of My Fathers" presents a good match, especially since it is the kind of verse that Ryan would have been likely to read.⁶⁶ He seems also to have read a good deal of Poe, going so far as to use "Nevermore"

for a refrain in one of his own poems. There are echoic snatches of another melancholy Baltimorean in the meter of “At Last”:

Into a temple vast and dim,
Solemn and vast and dim,
Just when the last sweet Vesper Hymn
 Was floating far away,

With eyes that tabernacled tears—
Her heart the home of tears—
And cheeks wan with the woes of years,
 A woman went one day.

Ryan’s most popular poem was unquestionably “The Conquered Banner.” Those who have invoked the poem to argue for furling the present-day Confederate Flag either read the poem in absolute isolation or misapprehend Ryan’s politics entirely. Ryan sacralizes the banner that he would have treated like the body of Christ. He was one of the very first to so explicitly link the Confederate Cause to ambient Christian tradition. It is not a particularly subtle poem, and so it is not very difficult to see the connections that Ryan draws. One argument for putting away the flag is that “there’s not one left to lave it/In the blood which heroes gave it.” “Laving” the flag, that is, soaking it in the blood of the slain, presents a rather strange image. But a bloody Jesus was laved in preparation for the tomb, and there were few southerners who would not understand the deeper meaning of “washed in the blood.” Ryan follows up with a Catholic importation a few lines later: “And the valiant hosts are scattered/Over whom it floated high.” Here he borrows language from his beloved *sanctus*, which is a staple of his poetry. The *sanctus* concludes the preface of the mass, and, more specifically, offers a song of thanksgiving echoing the heavenly choir (the host). Ryan had great affection for the *sanctus*, and if one imagines the rite, so familiarly chanted, it is particularly striking within this context. In translation, it begins, “Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord

God of Hosts...” It concludes “Hosannah on the highest.” It is no accident that Ryan chose the language of “hosts” and “high.” The Catholic ear recognizes the chant before the Eucharist; no higher blessing could be bestowed on the fallen soldiers and their bodily sacrifice. “Host” is crammed with poetic meaning; it can refer to armies, the angels attending God, or, in the particularly Catholic usage, the body of Christ. It is, in other words, a word made for sentimental poetry.

Ryan next borrows a rhyme scheme from Poe, and a Biblical refrain in this couplet: “While around it [the flag] sounds the wailing/Of its people in their woe.” “Treat it gently—it is holy—For it droops above the dead.” So, too, the body of Christ, but there is a deeper register here. The crucifix is shrouded during Lent and until Good Friday in Catholic tradition (Protestants also drape the cross, but generally without a representation of the corporeal Jesus). It seems fairly clear, if a little bizarre, that Ryan is using the Confederate battle flag to veil the cross, but that is his symbolic intention. “Touch it not—unfold it never,” writes Ryan, somewhat inappositely invoking the *noli me tangere* that the resurrected Jesus speaks to Mary Magdalene in the gospel of John.

In any event, the poem ends on a note of waiting, advising adherents to “Let it droop there, furled forever/For its people’s hopes are dead!” Apparently, this is a period of not-so-joyful anticipation, since there is not yet the Confederate Christ to redeem the Lost Cause. Yet the poem’s title suggests that there will be a reincarnation. Why did Jesus die? To *conquer* sin/death. Those who sang “The Conquered Banner” were intoning a venerably Catholic—and richly Christian—hymn.

Thomas Nelson Page, another august Lost Cause promoter, later configured the South not merely as in the vanguard of the Christian host, but as a kind of Christ. In delivering

“The Old South,” he did not hold back: “She [the South] was crucified; bound hand and foot; laid away in the sepulcher of the departed; the mouth of the sepulcher was stopped, was sealed with the seal of government, and a watch was set. The South was dead, and buried, and yet she rose again. The voice of God called her forth; she came clad in her graveclothes, but living, and with her face uplifted to the heavens from which had sounded the call of her resurrection.”⁶⁷ Perhaps he realized that his subject matter was a little too sacrosanct; in later editions, he bowdlerized some of the expressly Christian phrasing. By contrast, Father Ryan never backed down from transfiguring the Lost Cause. A generation of southern writers labored under his eschatology.

Outside of the realm of poetry, Ryan’s journalistic writings reveal that he was an exceptionally skillful polemicist. Though he was a Lost Cause exponent and wrote several books of Catholic apologetics, he never mounted a defense of slavery itself. There are a few hints that Ryan harbored misgiving about slavery. “In Rome” associates slavery with paganism: “The soldiers stood with armor on/In steel-clad ranks and serried/The while their red swords flashed upon/The slaves whose rights they buried.” The unnamed London correspondent who described Ryan at Missionary Ridge claimed that “though he opposed the system of human slavery, he dearly loved the southland.” Was a British abolitionist putting words in his mouth, or did he hear something that was lost to posterity? It seems hard to believe, given Ryan’s support of the status quo, his postwar advocacy of segregation, and his close collaboration with Verot in *The Pacificator*.

There are a few other clues. Ryan would write in later years that emancipation was “a very Providence,” and the silver lining of the late cloud was that it had “destroyed all caste based on wealth in the South.” In good Catholic form, Ryan sees redemption in suffering.

It was a merciful destruction. Money lost its lofty meaning. Poverty lost its proscriptive meaning, the planter and the peasant became of one station, save this that the planter had family traditions and memories of leisure and honor: but the peasant had also traditions of toil and honesty. Furthermore in the days of the Confederacy, the richest and the poorest, clothed in the same Gray met together as equals. Their common cause equalized them and made them as brothers.⁶⁸

Historian Alan T. Nolan dissects the corpus of the Lost Cause and arrives at “The Anatomy of the Myth” in his so titled essay. The basic claims of the legend, à la Nolan:

- *Slavery Was Not the Sectional Issue*. Rather, cultural differences (particularly the industrial/agricultural rift), investment banking and tariffs, etc.
- *The Abolitionist as Provocateurs*. A corollary to the principle that slavery was not the cause of the war.
- *The South Would Have Given Up Slavery*. In apparent contradiction of evidence that southern states, far from relaxing their grip, were putting a choke hold on the institution. E.g., a Virginia law dating from 1849 that made it a criminal offense to so much as state “that owners had not the right of property in their slaves.”
- *The Nature of the Slaves*. The two main varieties were the faithful slave and “the happy darky stereotype.”⁶⁹

The persistence of these articles is well attested in recurrent debates, both academic and cultural. As George Orwell said, “Who controls the past controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.” Historian Gary Gallagher asserts, “in terms of shaping how Americans have assessed and understood the Civil War, Lost Cause succeeded to a remarkable degree.”⁷⁰ Some scholars claim that Lost Cause influence has dominated Civil War historical scholarship, North and South, and Reconstruction’s smokescreen compounds the difficulty of a clear view.

As a white southerner living after the war, history was indeed the nightmare from which Ryan could not awake. “You see, I live in yesterdays; my dreams are there,” Ryan admitted in one of his letters to Louis B. James. In another he recorded that the Bishop asked him, “Do you never laugh?” “Rarely,” replied Ryan stiffly, “and never aloud.”⁷¹ Was he

ever able to recover that portion of ordinary joy that he enjoyed before mourning enshrouded him? Ryan's long, bedraggled black coat befitted a man in constant sorrow. Gradually, perhaps without even realizing it, he was inducted further into a priesthood of a different order.

On each Lost Cause article, we find Ryan "orthodox"—with the exception of the third. Ryan's editorials, particularly those written in New Orleans, which resist scalawag Republicanism, carpetbaggers, and various economic reforms, show that Ryan supported the slavery-in-form (if not slavery-in-fact) of the post-war years. Indeed, so ruthlessly did white southerners band together to reclaim power that more than one commentator has suggested that the white South lost the war but "won Reconstruction." At no point does Ryan seem to deny that slavery was the basis of southern civilization, or that it would have abated if left to run its course.⁷²

Like later Agrarians, Ryan recognized the potential of a southern economy and stressed loyalty to a local economy. But unlike later agrarians, or even his kindred spirit, John Mitchel (who believed that New England mill workers "were more in need of emancipation than the slaves of the South"), Ryan saw the necessity of a manufacturing economy as a foregone conclusion.⁷³ And in this, Ryan came much closer to reality. "We may have to submit to be tied to the Juggernaut car of Governmental power, defeated and oppressed as we are," he admits, "but our hearts and our minds are free, and if we cannot work out our political independence, we can, at least, work a Commercial and Manufactural independence, which will be more beneficial and more advantageous to us..." Ryan enthusiastically endorses the suggestion that Baltimore should be the South's commercial center, and advises, "Keep our money at home. Keep it among our own people, among those

we know to be our friends, and sooner or later the withdrawal of Southern trade will bring the purse-proud oppressors of the North, cringing and fawning at our feet.... This is the shortest, safest and surest road to independence. Try it.”⁷⁴

Ryan’s article makes a noteworthy entry in the intellectual history of the agrarian tradition, even if it is motivated by the need to settle a score. As to the nature of slaves, Ryan writes in *A Catholic Convention of One*, “[T]he Negro is naturally good-natured. In disposition, he is sympathetic; mentally, he is credulous, and in his will, he is both weak and stubborn. It is easy to make him happy; and I verily think that the happiest, merriest, lightest, hearts in the Union are those of Negro girls and boys, from their seventh to their sixteenth year.”

How much daily traffic Ryan had with black southerners is an open question, apart from what may be safely assumed in a highly segregated society that would only become more so after the Civil War. One passage of *A Catholic Convention* shows some familiarity with black churchgoing practice, and suggests some firsthand observation:

A negro likes loudness; boisterousness is his native element. He is more like a volcano than quiet, still valley. He *must* shout; he must sing; he must climb the slopes of melody, carrying his hymn up towards Heaven, till he seems almost to touch the jasper gates. And he must wing his arms, and rock his body, and dance about and around, until his powerful physical frame quivers from head to foot with uncontrollable sensations, and he swoons away in utter unconsciousness of all surroundings,--swoons away a sinner, and rises up a converted man. This is what is called among them, “getting religion.” Besides, he likes a show.⁷⁵

Ryan took a sanguine view of the birth rate among black southerners, which was already beginning to alarm the white majority. One of the Presbyterian speakers alluded to “the remarkable increase,” leading to the inference that blacks would “at no far off, future day, out-number the whites.” “What then?” is Ryan’s response. “God only knows...But I

have a trustful confidence in the gentle ways and workings of Divine Providence. Every age brings its problems, dark-looking in the distance; but when they comes near to us, there is light, and they get their solution.”⁷⁶ Catholics were never much bothered about the “problem” of increase.

More usually, Ryan’s highly ordained mind demands order. “Compromise is the grave of truth,” wrote Ryan, who distrusted the sheer messiness of sectarian division in the South.⁷⁷ Remarkably, though, Ryan fully owns to the connections between religion and social control, vigorously disputing as “egregiously mistaken” the notion that “in the days of slavery no Church did much spiritual work among Negroes.” On the contrary, “the spiritual interests of the black race generally evoked the serious considerations of their masters,—even from a worldly point of view. For the better Christians they were, the better behaved would they be.”⁷⁸

It is a moment of astonishing candor.

And what Ryan did was characteristically different than the majority of apologists. Slavery’s rightness or wrongness was incidental to the demonstrable rightness of states’ rights. In one editorial, he argued that if one were rashly inclined to enfranchise African Americans (whom he frequently described in bestial terms), that it was none of his say-so. They could establish such a state if it met with the will of the people. Time and again, Ryan aired his editorial view that it could only result in disaster, and insinuated that too much black freedom would lead to a race war.⁷⁹ He seemed to reach a personal nadir in his *Banner* editorials from the period. He cast about feverishly for targets and filled his front page with bruising attacks on individuals, institutions, and entire peoples. To some extent, all of Ryan’s spites are traceable to the loss of his brother, and his hatred for the Yankee conceals a

measure of self-loathing. The distinction between “peoples” of the North and South was, by and large, a sham distinction, the hasty invention of ideologues who needed to divide in order to politically conquer. A fringe southerner, Ryan had no slaves, no threatened property, no direct interest on the line except perhaps career-making glory and the rationalized high-ground of states’ rights. He sought the conflict and exhorted his brother to the fight. To admit that David’s premature death was for naught would be to fully inculcate himself. “If David had lived,” he reportedly remarked to a friend, “I would never have been heard of.”⁸⁰ Instead, he hardened his heart and his politics. It is no wonder that so many of his poems fantasize about a return to the past, and particularly the years before the war.

Stuck in the present, Ryan chose an instrument calculated to appeal to the climate of fear in those years. He stooped to race baiting and raised the specter of black legislative take-over, a measure seen as purely punitive by many white southerners. Such sentiments seem superficially incompatible with Ryan’s endorsement of schools for African American children. But they are consistent, insofar as Ryan was a paternalist, and took for granted the necessity of a segregated society. He dropped news stories of import in favor of soapbox space, and joined the *Banner* in southern journalism’s race to the bottom during the bleak years of Reconstruction. “We hold that the White Race is superior to the Black, as a general principle,” he submitted, “and that the Government of the United States and its several subordinate State and Municipal Government belong to the white people of the land, as a particular principle. The first we hold is universal; the second as applicable to our country and our day.”⁸¹

Personal tribulations and a pathological culture hardly exonerate the priest. His slurs breach any priestly commitment to charity, and it is precisely the sort of muckraking office

that no priest should enter. Some of Ryan's ideas were obviously unconscionable for a man of the cloth, which is not to ignore the fact that most of the nation held them; the opprobrium can go only so far. Irish Americans have been faulted for upholding slavery, or, even more absurdly, for not linking up with abolitionists. Less thought is given to how they might have been expected to join a group that most Americans regarded as a lunatic fringe with anarchist aims. And perhaps even less consideration is given to the madness of that particular moment, and the fevered pitch of polemics in an age of absolutists. Since they started out in a lowly racial caste, their status was tied directly to how they accentuated their whiteness. Here they held a considerable advantage: they were physically indistinguishable from their Anglo-Saxon and Scots-Irish countrymen. If full assimilation was the desideratum, it behooved them to go along the system. The Irish American minority—especially southern Irish—held little hope of independently changing America's racial caste system, and stood to gain by subscribing to it.

* * *

Had Ryan been born in Ireland, like his parents, he might have been a nationalist of a different stripe. Irish-American nationalism thrived in nineteenth century America. Lawrence McCaffrey observes, "it was almost the exclusive preserve of Catholic immigrants and their descendants whose religion functioned as the essence and symbol of ethnicity."⁸² Daniel O'Connell's iconic power waned among Irish Americans when he endorsed abolition, and other groups rushed to fill the vacuum. The Fenian Brotherhood exerted the most salient presence during Ryan's adult years.

Ryan must have been sensible to the fact that northerners comprised the Irish-American nationalist majority. Even more troubling to his Confederate eye would have been the fact that Union veterans overwhelmingly filled the ranks of the Fenian Brotherhood. So he resolved the problem by becoming an arm's-length Irish-American nationalist. He was able to keep the faith of his father by running every scrap of news he could find about the Irish revolutionary groups and their various permutations—alongside Catholic intelligence from the mother country. He dutifully reported their meetings and activities, and he ran the most rabid Anti-English editorials of the day in his Catholic newspapers. This, despite the fact that the American Catholic Church condemned violent republicanism, both for its lack of deference to church and secular authority and its secret society underpinnings.

While northerners did not monopolize Irish nationalism in America, its perceived Yankee character imputed Ryan's Lost Cause orthodoxy. Ultimately he could not trumpet a movement that would call his southern nationalism into question. It did not stop Ryan from addressing Atlanta's Hibernian Society—whose legacy would play such a role in Margaret Mitchell's life—and calling Cromwell "the General Sherman of his time."⁸³ The "vast audience," who feted the poet-priest for Saint Patrick's day, "repeatedly burst forth into rapturous applause." Irish-American nationalism was the cause that Ryan plumped on the side, since it was a cause that southerners might see as perfidious.

Ryan's Lost Cause eulogizers who foregrounded his Irishness were clearly working from second-hand information. Some labored under the misapprehension that he had been born in Ireland like some of his siblings. There is no indication that he had an Irish accent, and a number of accounts indicate that he had a mild southern accent. If he retained some of Ireland's cultural memory, his country was decidedly the Southland.

Ryan is rumored to have flirted with one other cause. There is something to the old lawyer's chestnut, that if it walks like a duck, and sounds like a duck, it is a duck. Then again, this is the case that lawyers press when they have only circumstantial evidence, that is, when they meet the "beyond a reasonable doubt" standard. In the case of Ryan's alleged Klan involvement, that is all we have, and we are left to wonder if the preponderance of the evidence—to suggest the lesser standard—implicates Ryan in the Klan. At the time when Ryan could have participated, the organization was young, soon to be decentralized, and generally out of control. Initially, it looked to be nothing more than a mean-spirited joke. But a "hilarious social club" founded by six bored (and likely somewhat pickled) Confederate Veterans went out of hand, graduating from cutting capers to more elaborate nightriding campaigns.

The issue is a pregnant one and it deserves careful consideration, because if Ryan were indeed "a grand chaplain," it would explode a view of the organization as a continuous entity with consistent aims, unseating the notion that the Klan nurtured an anti-Catholic mission from its inception. The first phase Klan had infiltrated every level of social organization among white southerners. If Ryan involved himself, it would show just how far the reach extended, and introduce a considerable irony to the American history, since a Catholic would have played a role in the first version of America's preeminent "terrorist" organization. Ryan's bathetic arrival at such a juncture would indicate just how far he was willing to go in promoting Confederate nationalism, or resisting a Federal crackdown, depending on one's point of view. And if he did involve himself, he reaps the ignominy of helping spur along an organization that redounded rather horribly on his fellow Catholics,

ensuring that they would remain a minority ill at ease in the Southland. A moral absolutist might say, this was mere poetic justice, since hatred begets hatred.

Don Seitz's *The Dreadful Decade* (1926), refers to those who "went in [to the Klan] as sentimentalists." One of them "was Father Abram J. Ryan, who became Grand Chaplain of the Order, and General Albert Pike, of Arkansas, who was made Chief Justice."⁸⁴ Neither office exists in Klan literature. Seitz seems to be rehashing Susan Lawrence Davis's *Authentic History of the Ku Klux Klan, 1865-1877* (1924), which makes a very curious study.⁸⁵ Davis strives to rehabilitate the Klan's reputation by bringing it into the sunshine, and revealing its benign origins. Her strategy is simple: she implicates as many southern notables as she can name as card-carrying (so to speak) Klansmen. The results are not just highly motivated; they are, in many cases, of very doubtful reliability.⁸⁶ The rumor is also bruited in Clyde Regan Wilson's *Baptized in Blood*, albeit with less certainty: "Father Abram Ryan may have served as a chaplain [of the Ku Klux Klan]." Wilson cites Trelease's *White Terror* (1971) and other sources. Trelease is somewhat equivocal on the issue: "Father Abram J. Ryan, a former Catholic chaplain with the Confederate army and a widely read author of Confederate verse, was sometimes identified in later years as chaplain of the Klan, although no such office was mentioned in the Prescript." But, "[w]hatever truth there may be in the claim, or in his reported attendance at Klan meetings, the priest's sentiments were fitting enough."⁸⁷

Wilson and Trelease both point out that rank-and-file Confederates tended to become rank-and-file Klansmen, which raises the question of guilt by association. Ryan's funeral party did indeed read like a who's-who of Confederate leadership. There does not appear to be a smoking gun here, either, although it would not surprise me if one or more of Ryan's

cohorts could be linked to Klan. Ryan's name does not appear in the Congressional investigations of 1871, and if he had been involved, he would have presented a highly desirable target for partisan investigators. Ryan's agenda seems more suggestive. He had no love for Parson William G. Brownlow, whom he excoriates in *A Catholic Convention of One*. Neither did the Klan, since Brownlow went as far as advocating federal martial law, if necessary, to stamp out the shadowy society in the Volunteer State. Brownlow was the Reconstruction governor of Tennessee and a former unionist (but pro-slavery) leader who had been forced into exile during the war.⁸⁸ "The fighting parson" despised Catholics and had been an enthusiastic supporter of the Know Nothings.⁸⁹

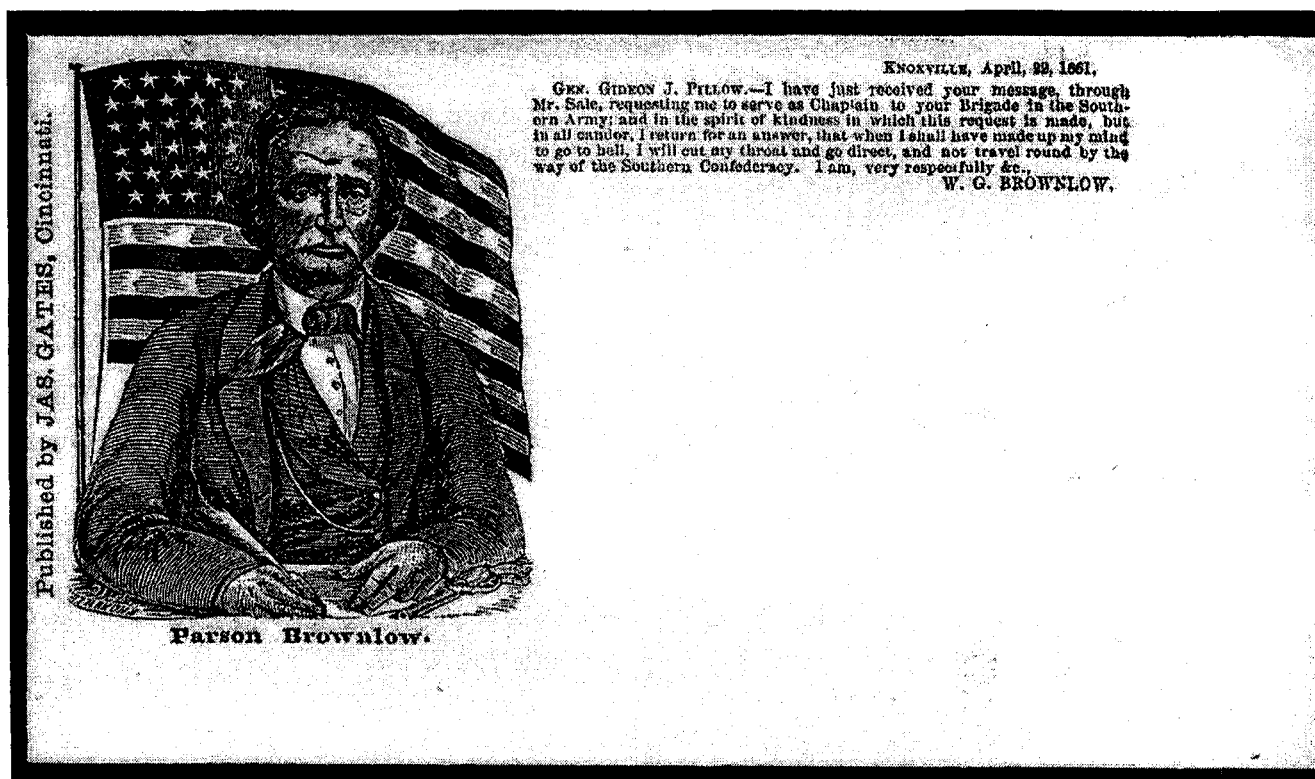


Illustration 15. Ryan's nemesis, Parson Brownlow, Whig and Know-Nothing.⁹⁰

Brownlow edited the Knoxville *Whig and Rebel Ventilator*—a kind of *Banner* antidote—and he was a Methodist minister. Both roles threatened Ryan, and sometimes

rendered him apoplectic. Had the two men met, they might have vanished suddenly, each cancelled out by the other. Some of Ryan's other views were in line with Klan: his frequent accusations that outsiders were inciting blacks to rebellion, his anti-public school stance, and his general hatred of Radical rule.

A number of considerations may have stayed Ryan from joining, though. The Pope had forbidden Catholic membership in secret societies. Freemasonry claimed to be historically coextensive with Christianity, so it traced its origins through nearly every heretical sect in early Church history, including Gnosticism and Mithraism.⁹¹ Needless to say, the Church did not look kindly on any organization that demanded mortal oaths or threatened its orthodoxy. In Ryan's own lifetime, Pius IX served up a half dozen decrees denouncing Freemasonry.⁹²

But there is one final bit of circumstantial evidence that I would introduce to this enigma, with no additional warranties. Any American who visits *Semana Santa* (Holy Week) in Seville will do a double take at the costumes of the participants. The penitents don pointed hoods that mask their identities, a practice that dates to the fifteenth century and the Spanish Inquisition. It is particularly noteworthy, then, that in the very early Klan, there was no dress code, and "some members adopted a different costume consisting of 'Spanish jackets and wide trowsers [sic]...' "⁹³ According to Trelease, the standard regalia of the early phase consisted of "a white mask with holes for eyes and nose, a high conical cardboard hat which made the wearer seem taller, and a long flowing robe" (he gives no source).⁹⁴ The Klan was very eclectic in its iconography, but is it not curious that their uniforms appear to be exactly those worn by Catholic penitents?⁹⁵

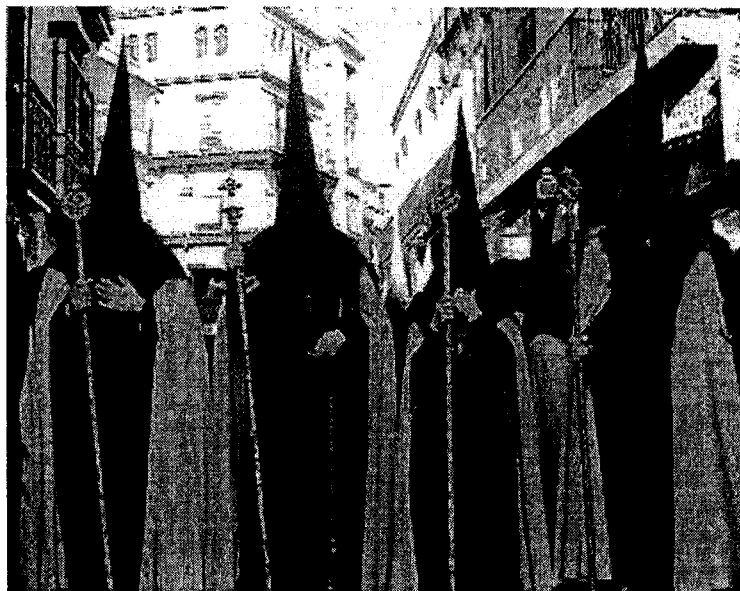


Illustration 16. Holy Week in modern Seville; two views.



Illustration 17. Reconstruction-era Klan regalia; two views.⁹⁶

References to the Klan do surface in some of Ryan's columns, as the clipping below demonstrates:

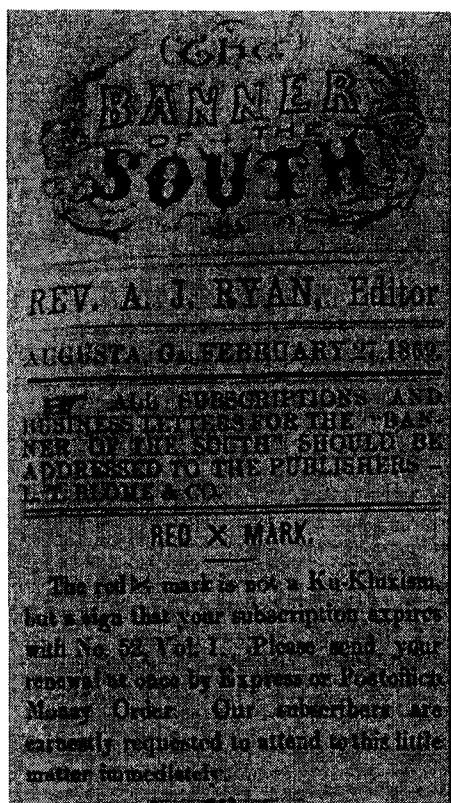


Illustration 18. Possible coded message in *The Banner*.



KU-KLUX EMBLEMS.

Illustration 19. Symbols from William Wells Brown's *My Southern Home* (1880).⁹⁷

The scrap looks innocent enough on its face, but it is almost certainly an encoded message. RED X MARK, Ku-Kluxism, SIGN, EXPIRES, SEND, AT ONCE, EXPRESS, ORDER, ATTEND, and IMMEDIATELY are examples of words that appear in other published Klan communiqués. The notice ran again on February 27 and on March 6, 1869. And another notably cryptic passage from the *Banner* of April 25, 1868 stands out as a possible Klan order:

A Confederate **ghost** sent the editors of the **North Alabamian** a **Ku-Klux order** and enclosed twenty dollars in Confederate money to pay the **printing**. He says it passes in the **moon** at **par**. It **passes down here below par....**

A notice posted in Montgomery, Alabama, gives a typical header for a Klan message: “HORRIBLE SEPULCHRE, BLOODY MOON, CLOUDY MOON, LAST HOUR. Special Order.”

In the December 18, 1869 edition of *The Banner*, one finds,

We counsel no revolution, no uprising, **no secret conclaves** or masked murders; but we say to our people, **watch and wait**. Be united. Be firm. The **day** of our triumph will come. The **Sun** of Justice will some day **arise** and **dispel** the **dark night** of Tyranny, which now **hangs** like a **pall** over our beloved South.

Maybe this particular meeting had been squelched and postponed to another time. Or it may have signaled a sign that would appear at a preordained meeting place. In any event, **dark night** has Klan fingerprints. Likewise, “conclave” or “konklave”—a level of Klan organization. This is, of course, devil’s advocacy (a term that comes from the trial-like process of canonizing saints)—the plain meaning on the piece may be all that is intended.

It was common practice for encrypted messages to run in Democratic southern papers, whether the editors desired it or not. Ryan additionally permitted a fictional piece called “Among the Ku-Klux” to be carried on the front page of the *Banner*.⁹⁸ During Ryan’s

tenure at the *Morning Star*, years later, a number of White League editorial endorsements surfaced.⁹⁹ Ryan begins to look and smell like the proverbial duck.

More skeptically, the chronology seems to sit against Ryan's involvement. Ryan served a parish in Nashville from May, 1865, until July, 1867, according to Bowes and other sources.¹⁰⁰ He could have gotten a whiff of the first incarnation of the protective Klan. But militating against the possibility is the fact that the Pulaski phenomenon did not pick up steam as a widespread southern problem until the Radical government took over in 1867, around the time that Ryan transferred to Augusta. Even though Alabama was an epicenter for underground Klan activity in the '70s, if Ryan "rode" after leaving Augusta, he did so during the period when he was under Bishop Quinlan's thumb. Quinlan, who was known for being controlling, kept very close tabs on Ryan, going so far as to publish a notice, "to all whom it may concern," that he would "accede to Ryan's request" to retire to Biloxi, but that he would "still claim him as a priest of my diocese in all things, under my sole jurisdiction; and he will report to me personally every month."¹⁰¹ With Quinlan taking preemptive measures to ward off any cloud of scandal, it seems highly unlikely that Ryan would have found the opportunity to discharge his church duties and engage in clandestine activities.

Ironically, during the second Klan phase, Ryan's name would be invoked as a shield for Klan bigotry. Swaggering Andrew Erwin, the former mayor of Athens, Georgia, had a reputation for skirmishing with the hooded riders. Addressing the raucous audience at a Democratic rally in Madison Square Garden, Erwin objected to the notion that the Klan was another harmless fraternity. It was, rather, in David Chalmers' paraphrase, an enemy to freedom of conscience and societal peace and harmony. "In the name of the Confederacy's

Father Ryan and Judah P. Benjamin [who was Jewish], and of Americans who had died in France,” Erwin called upon the attendees to abolish the Klan.¹⁰²

Ryan’s reputation served as a bulwark elsewhere. The “Nashville Catholic High School for Boys” had its name changed to the more winsome “Father Ryan High School.” “With Ku Kluxers menacing the Catholics,” writes Thomas Stritch, “the bishop and his councilors saw at once that naming the school for the famous poet-priest of the Confederacy, a name venerated by Nashvillians and Tennesseans of all faiths, would be a subtle and telling reminder that Catholicism had a much longer and infinitely nobler tradition than the Kluxers and what they stood for.”¹⁰³ Even after his death, much was in Ryan’s name.¹⁰⁴

This much is clear: Ryan’s name appears on either side of the issue. No one can yet prove that Ryan hid behind the hood, and no one can prove that he was not involved. If it can be proven incontrovertibly that Ryan participated, it would explode a popular misconception about the Klan, which presumes that Catholics were ever Klan victims, and certainly not participants. Ryan once genially editorialized that the Church *invited* investigation, having nothing to hide and her glories to reveal. More recently, the Catholic Church has been pushed to accept new standards of transparency. I come to this topic not to besmirch, but in the earnest pursuit of another facet of Ryan’s strange story. For now, at least, the Klan mystery must be admitted as another instance where Ryan’s real identity has been masked by the lore he helped create.

But just what was Ryan’s popular reputation? President McKinley recited Ryan’s poetry in the White House, and Joseph Pulitzer devised funds for a Ryan memorial in his will.¹⁰⁵ Margaret Mitchell scripted him into *Gone With the Wind*. Verses from Ryan’s “C.S.A.” inscribe the Tomb to the Unknown Confederate Soldier at Beauvoir. He has

popped up in recent culture wars and the flap over the Confederate flag. As John Reed said, Ryan gave some “widely ignored advice” in his best-known poem, “The Conquered Banner,” when he wrote, “Furl it, hide it—let it rest.” Ryan reported of his Northern lecture circuit that the Archbishop gushed, “There are three *rages* in Boston now: Mrs. Langtry, Lawrence Barrett, and Father Ryan.”¹⁰⁶

Some of the signs of his renown are obvious—for example, that he was a keynote speaker at Robert E. Lee’s funeral. Alexander Stephens, Vice-President of the Confederacy, went to see Ryan lecture at Davis Hall in Atlanta, and on another occasion, the priest shared a stage with Jefferson Davis. Ryan seems to have tried to ingratiate himself with the Confederate President, and some of his more enthusiastic biographers have tried to suggest that the two were quite close, perhaps on the strength of the fact that they lived within walking distance when Ryan retired to *Sea Rest* in Biloxi.

But the depth of Ryan’s association with Davis is difficult to gauge. Davis’ famously voluminous memoirs and letters record scant mention of Ryan. Evidently he passed along the poetry that Ryan pressed on him to other parties. “*Your* work & *our* defense,” Ryan urged Davis, “ought to be...the ‘Sacred Scripture’ of our Confederacy. And you ought to be *almost inspired* to give to the world of false policies the doctrines of deathless Principles.” In other words, Ryan wanted Davis to write a divinely-inspired apologetic. And Davis tried to do exactly that in *The Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government* (1881).¹⁰⁷

As the proverb says, after the game, the king and pawn go into the same box. More than likely, their association was more the stuff of lost cause invention than fact. If Ryan and Davis were indeed “bosom friends for many years,” as some Ryan biographers have tried to

stake out, it instances a persistent thread in the Confederate president's life: Catholicism and Irish immigrants.¹⁰⁸

Others signs are more difficult to evaluate. One can only surmise, but contemporary sources reiterate his fame with an almost monotonous insistence. Allowing that 1) the sentimental encomiums of his time favored hyperbole, and 2) his champions were often motivated by their sectional allegiance, it is still apparent that Ryan was a personage of national stature.

We can gauge some of Ryan's celebrity—and his subsequent dramatic descent into cultural oblivion—from contemporaneous obituaries. Sister Mary Donallan must have put out a call for Ryan clippings, because the obituaries came flooding in. They comprise an impressive visual record of Ryan's popularity, and the sheer number of the obituaries suggests that Ryan cut a figure of national renown. (Unfortunately, Donallan was a fastidious clipper, and neatly trimmed away the names and dates of the media.)

One New York newspaper appeared to be laying the groundwork, optimistically, for canonization. Ryan had advised a crippled young woman named Grace Henley to say the rosary; she not only made a recovery but joined a convent.¹⁰⁹ Had Ryan been less cantankerous, and lived a bit longer, who knows but that he would not have become the Sainted Father Ryan?

In any event, Ryan loved music and reputedly composed some of his verse to musical themes. He was said to be a strong singer and piano player, but he was abstemious in every indulgence, and warned against the vogue for piano in fashionable finishing schools.¹¹⁰ Songwriters, for their part, liked to set Ryan's lyrics to music. That, in itself, is perhaps not terribly significant, given the appetite for sentimental music in Ryan's time, but it contributes

to Ryan's popular aura. "My Heart Is Truer than the Sky," "When?," "My Mother," "A Child's Wish before the Altar," "The Sword of Robert Lee," and of course, "The Conquered Banner," all found their way to the piano.

RESPECTFULLY DEDICATED TO MY DEAR FRIEND
CHAS. FRED. MUTTER, 

MY HEART IS TRUER THAN THE SKY.

Poem by
REV. ABRAM J. RYAN.

MUSIC BY

Rev. R. J. Sorin.

DE LISLE, MISS.

5

BALTIMORE P. J. LAMMERS PUBLISHER.

Illustration 20. One of a handful of Ryan poems adapted for music.¹¹¹

Ryan's poetry may seem fusty now, but it garnered accolades from contemporaries. A *New York Times* reviewer gave Ryan very high marks: "His style is that of Poe, without the excessive finish bestowed by that genius on his work." The *Philadelphia Press* declared that "some of his finest lyrics are really notable additions to the American literature of the day."¹¹² Association is the next best thing to fame, so perhaps it counts for something that Longfellow troubled to write Ryan about his poems. Longfellow recognized what he termed "melody of versification" in Ryan's work, and made his own sectional loyalties plain: "Of course, you will not expect me to sympathize with all the verses connected with the war, yet in some of them I recognize a profound pathos and the infinite pity of it all." Longfellow seems to let Ryan down gently, in that regard. "When you call yourself the last and least of those who rhyme," he wrote in his letter, "you remind me of the graceful line of Catullus to Cicero." The analogy is sublime and somewhat unflattering, since Longfellow implies that Ryan was playing Catullus to his Cicero, a political drop-out to a king, a flunky paying necessary tribute, a poetaster to a real poet. Either Ryan did not catch the backhanded comment or he did not care; he quoted the letter at some of his public readings.¹¹³

If imitation is the highest form of flattery, then we might induce something from the copycat poetry that sprung up around Ryan. At the very least, some of Ryan's poetic analogs show that he is not as singular as one might assume. The first of these, Theodore O'Hara, also vied for Catholic Confederate poet laureate, a title that seems to have been conferred as much by sectional zeal as ability. It is best to think of him as a Ryan doppelganger. For he tried to achieve the very same things as Ryan—poetic recognition, a place among the "great men" of the Confederacy—and yet, by some perversity of fate, he was cheated, seeming to

snatch defeat from the jaws of victory in each case. “Chances for distinction in politics, journalism, the military, and literature” seemed to “pass through his hands like water.”¹¹⁴ This probably had everything to do with his alcoholism, which cost him many promotions, as it has cost many other rambling souls.

In an ironic cooption that probably had him doing several turns in his grave, “Bivouac of the Dead” was chosen to inscribe the entrance to the cemetery that Lincoln so famously consecrated, and many other Union cemeteries besides, including Arlington, built on Lee’s federally confiscated property. The Rebel poet in later years would be touted posthumously as “Uncle Sam’s Poet.” Indeed, one of O’Hara’s funeral orations has been credited as a likely source and analog for the Gettysburg Address, itself an American institution.¹¹⁵ Perhaps he would be consoled by the theme’s wiry durability, as evinced by the latterday revisitations of Robert Lowell (“For the Union Dead”) and Allen Tate (“Ode to the Confederate Dead”).

Ryan and O’Hara were of a piece. O’Hara was twenty years Ryan’s senior, but both were known as melancholy, self-flagellating sufferers. Both southern Irish Catholics became citizens of Mobile, edited newspapers, and professed southern nationalism. Both predicated the greater portion of their notoriety on single poems (“The Conquered Banner,” and “Bivouac of the Dead,” respectively).

Both men were fascinated by war-making as a conduit to honor, which has become something of a southern tradition. O’Hara raised a troop of Kentucky Volunteers, gained the favorable attention of Jefferson Davis, who was then secretary of war, and participated in the antebellum campaigns of the southwest, which proved to be a nursery of future Confederate officers. He was tracking down Comanche guerillas in antebellum Texas when he botched

his commission. Faced with the threat of court-martial stemming from charges of “Drunkenness on Duty”—tendered by a young lieutenant colonel named Robert E. Lee—he had no choice but to resign.¹¹⁶

His service in the Confederacy foundered when a mix-up resulted in a demotion rather than a deserved promotion. He resigned, and complained bitterly. Reinstated, he again fell in the ranks. His best chance for vindication vanished when he was passed over for Secretary of War in the Confederate cabinet; Davis chose O’Hara’s rival/patron, John C. Breckinridge, instead.

At the war’s end, while Breckinridge was taking a business-only trip down the Florida coast to make his escape, O’Hara moved to Columbus, Georgia, and tried his hand at a cotton-warehousing enterprise. For a while things looked up: he went to church regularly, and his charismatic presence was highly sought in social circles. Then the warehouse burned down. Disgusted, O’Hara retired near Guerryton, Alabama, where family lore says he remained a crack-shot, and winged rifle shots from his porch at “recalcitrant goats.”¹¹⁷ A Faulknerian end for the minor poet.

There is, of course, an element of desperation in it all, and in the way that O’Hara told the tale. Perhaps because he led a frustrated life—which ended abruptly in 1867, most likely by cirrhosis of the liver—O’Hara rendered himself forgettable. Yet he was a brilliant elocutionist and logician. The *New York Times* later praised O’Hara’s “Southern rights” editorials, noting that he carried out his work “with great brilliancy and success.” But lasting success was not to be his. And that is why today Bertram Wyatt-Brown can fairly ask, “Who has heard of Thomas Holley Chivers, Mirabeau Lamar, Theodore O’Hara, or Abram Ryan?”¹¹⁸ Ryan, at least, received some of the praise he sought during his lifetime.



Illustration 21. James Ryder Randall.¹¹⁹

James Ryder Randall enters the laureate competition with his own ode to “Our Confederate Dead.” Randall offered his poetic response to Arlington with a Lost Cause valediction: “Our Cause survives the Tyrant’s tread, And sleeps to wake at Arlington.” Randall was another galvanized southern Irish Catholic whose popular fame gave Ryan a run for the money. They were born within a year of each other, Randall in nearby Baltimore. Randall was arguably a one-off, too—“Maryland, My Maryland,” became a Confederate war anthem and rallying-cry, and it was anthologized in his one volume of poetry. Southern newspapers disseminated the poem within days; not long after it was published in a Baltimore paper called *The South*, the editor was jailed for sedition. A slew of musical broadsides and adaptations soon followed. Randall was a poet after Ryan’s heart, and some

of his religious poems are suggestively derivative, for example, “Resurgam,” “Why the Robin’s Breast is Red,” “Magdalen,” and “Sunday Reverie.”

Randall also wrote a poetic response to the “Conquered Banner,” labeled, rather predictably, “The Unconquered Banner.” Ryan suggested that the stricken colors should be furled away for safekeeping and veneration as he literally sacralized a symbol of the Lost Cause. Randall replies to “the sad priest-singer, in his dread despair,”

And thus our Southern flag,
From shore to shore
Emerges like an eagle from its sleep
To woo the sun, and in its heart to keep
The never-dying principle of Right,
Surviving every fierce, unequal fight.

Randall lauds “the peerless poet of that desperate age,” palms a favorite Ryan word—“foemen”—and invokes “the glad spirit of the poet-priest” “to watch our Banner, from the grave of strife/Rise with the glory of a new-born life.”

At least one female writer joined the choir of southern Irish war support. Very little is known of Florence J. Willard nee O’Connor. Neither her birth date (c. 1830) nor her death can be stated with certainty. O’Connor was a native Louisianan exiled in Europe for part of the hostilities. Her novel of the war, *The Heroine of the Confederacy* (1864) was first published in London. The novel’s heroine is a New Orleans Creole named Natalie de Villerie. Loyal to her city and her section, she cannot leave with her fiancé, choosing instead to donate her jewels to the Confederate cause. She refuses to surrender the flag to the Yankee oppressors in the city, and, in a hyperbolic act of patriotism, literally wraps herself in the southern banner.

She is shot for her trouble, though not badly wounded, and next joins the nuns in Richmond, where she is known as Soeur Secessia. “Sister Secession” is briefly reunited with her fiancé before he dies on the battlefield. Count Bernharnais, her unrequited love, waits in the wings, but the situation is desperate. Brokenhearted, her plantation in ruins, she cannot reciprocate, and like Scarlett, must await another day. The book entreats the reader from time to time and it seems that O’Connor hoped that it would propagandize abroad. Aware that many Irish have joined Union ranks, O’Connor calls them “the poor deluded victims of foreign birth, by the cunning of Yankee eloquence and Yankee trickery, were marched out and placed foremost in the ranks, that should death away *any*, the foreigners should be the first to meet it.”¹²⁰ South Carolina, “with all its Irish ancestry,” is hailed for leading the southern charge.¹²¹ She relates how Father Mullen of St. Patrick’s in New Orleans threatened to take command of the general’s troops, thundering, “Sir, I do not fear you in the least; and were you to dare to interfere with me, you would find your ranks of soldiery quickly thinned, as more than two-thirds of your army is composed of *Irish Catholics, and with them their God and Religion is first, and then their country; So touch me at your peril!*”¹²²

The book is a valuable reservoir of Catholic response to cultural submersion, though it is at times badly cobbled together. For instance, a character enquires of the protagonist what she is reading in order to launch a discursive apologetic. She is only too happy to oblige. “I was reading and pondering on the inconsistency of this author, who evidently advocates abolitionism, and Protestantism, yet in her writings has been culpable of many errors.... [T]he writer is evidently a rank Protestant, and can find nothing in the Catholic religion to censure, but launches forth into a very pathetic strain of moralizing, which she

puts into the mouth of her hero, referring to N.O. [New Orleans], says, ‘Here no temple-spires frown upon the gay votary of pleasure, but beneath the very shadow of the old cathedral, and under the unrepining eye of those who minister at her altars, I may pursue pleasure in her wildest revels, to her hidden and most secret retreats.’” (Actually, the offending passage appears in an anonymously written book called *Woman’s Faith: A Tale of Southern Life* (1856)).¹²³

The heroine of O’Connor’s Confederacy sings “Ave Sanctissima” and the “Ora Pro Nobis,” and prays before the shrine in her boudoir to “Jesus, Mary, and Joseph” on behalf of the “holy cause.” She is, in other words, unlike any other Confederate heroine that had been seen until Margaret Mitchell reimagined her type in *Gone with the Wind*. Saved from historical oblivion by her novel, Florence O’Connor has the best claim to being the original Scarlett O’Hara.

O’Hara, O’Connor, and Randall shared in Ryan’s worldview, but he outstripped them in celebrity. Some measure of Ryan’s renown can be gleaned from what he published. “A household name” seems to be the instant cliché of Ryan’s eulogizers. One is tempted to conclude that these boosters were a literal-minded crowd, since J.P. Kenedy brought the collection out in its “Household Editions of the Poets” series. Yet there is something to it. By 1908, *Father Ryan’s Poems* had been in continuous print for almost thirty years and had passed through over twenty-five editions, an enviable run by any bookseller’s standards.

Bob Taylor, governor of Tennessee, claimed Ryan for the Volunteer State in an 1897 address, and termed him “the Tom Moore of Dixie.” *The Great Republic by the Master Historians* (1902) bills Ryan prominently among southern poets, including Sidney Lanier, Henry Timrod, Paul Hamilton Hayne, and William Gilmore Simms.¹²⁴ Edwin Mims called

Ryan “the most popular” of the first few years after the Civil War; “before Hayne and Lanier and Russell began to do their best work, he was the Poet Laureate of the South.”¹²⁵ F.V.N. Painter did not include Ryan among the minor poets of the South, but gave him a chapter of his own (a distinction shared with Poe, Hayne, Timrod, and Lanier). Indeed, if one examines these older sources, Ryan’s name contends nearly as often as Timrod’s for “poet laureate.” As late as the mid twentieth century, Catholic literary scholars, pleasantly indifferent to the vicissitudes of history on anything less than a millennial time scale, were investing Ryan with canonical credit.¹²⁶

All of which must be taken with a grain of salt. *A Dictionary of American Writers* (1897) treated Ryan tersely and dismissively. “A Roman Catholic priest and verse-writer of the South whose verse has been much over-praised in some quarters. It is spirited and fluent, but has not the literary quality needful to preserve it.” One can read between the lines as to which “quarters” were over-praising Ryan. “After one of his lectures,” reported Bernadette Oldemoppen without irony, “a lady was heard to remark that if Father Ryan had said, ‘Baa, Baa, Black Sheep,’ the audience would have cried: ‘How perfectly charming.’”¹²⁷

Ryan’s literary merit notwithstanding, his cultural stature is reflected in two notable converts that he brought into the Church. One of them was Lieutenant General James Longstreet—“Benedict” Longstreet to Confederate diehards. Ryan seems not to have called much attention to that conversion, and with good reason. Longstreet remains the most reviled Scalawag in Lost Cause annals and neither side cared to remember him much except in accounts of the Gettysburg, the great “if” of Civil War history. Courting Longstreet would have posed a liability for Ryan’s Lost Cause eminence.

The poet-priest probably took him on because no one else would have him. Unreconstructed Confederates literally emptied the pews when Longstreet showed up at his Episcopalian church in New Orleans. Longstreet's second wife, a devout Catholic, wrote that he was "cut to the quick by such treatment," and "began to wonder if there was any church broad enough to withstand differences caused by political and sectional feeling. He discovered that the Roman Catholic priests extended him the treatment he longed for. He began to attend that church, and said that its atmosphere from the first appealed to him as the church of the sorrow-laden of earth." Obviously, he had been talking to Father Ryan, under whose ministration, Helen Longstreet avers, he converted.¹²⁸

Ryan also baptized the man who collected his poems. Like Longstreet, Hannis Taylor was branded an outsider for his New South ways, as he strove to "emancipate [the South] from a one-party system." The North Carolinian's unapologetic stances garnered praise from Walter Hines Page and Edgar Gardner Murphy, but his bid for a congressional seat was frustrated when opponents cast aspersions of "Popery."¹²⁹

All sources are in agreement on one point: Ryan was a very charismatic speaker and man. Thomas Stritch likens his cultural moment to that of Bishop Fulton Sheen at the height of his televised fame. The poet-priest earned an august reputation in an era of spectacular sermonizers. He must have picked up some of his skillset from other southerners. Ryan proudly wrote James from Ohio, "Up here, a lecturer reads from a manuscript; it is the style. When I lecture and tell them to remove the desk, or the table, and the pitcher of water and glass, they open their eyes wide; and I reckon they whisper, 'curious!'"¹³⁰ The Victorian scrapbooking fad ensured the preservation of some fragment of Ryan's extraordinary public

speaking, and accounts abound that he enthralled his audiences.¹³¹ (Admittedly, such plaudits were a matter of course at the time for “public men.”)

Jeremiah O’Connell memorialized Ryan thus:

He rendered signal service to the cause of religion, and received many persons into the Church. He became editor of the *Pacificator*, the most popular sheet published in the Confederacy, and widely circulated because of its strong advocacy of Southern rights. The pointed pen of Bishop Verot and the poet-priest’s contributions made it a welcome visitor to every family, and lent it a charm and a fascination which no publication in the South possessed. Father Ryan’s exposition and defence of Catholic doctrine rendered it an organ of incalculable advantage to the cause of religion. It was read everywhere, and almost domesticated the faith in every household that wept over the Lost Cause.

Whether *The Banner* was the most popular sheet published in the Confederacy is doubtful; as one of the only, if not *the* only paper devoted expressly to the Lost Cause, it makes a likely frontrunner within its class. This was the golden age of the small paper, and one historian put the readership at “about six thousand,” a very respectable circulation for an upstart Catholic broadsheet.¹³² *The Banner* “led all other southern publications in circulation,” according to an 1868 Nashville poll.¹³³

While 6,000 subscribers may sound fairly trivial, the number must be kept in proper perspective within the rural South. The *Memphis Appeal*, the largest daily in Tennessee at the eve of the Civil War, had a circulation of around 2,000. About as many read Joseph Addison Turner’s *Countryman*—where Joe Harris first worked as a printer’s devil—“making it one of the larger circulation newspapers in the South.”¹³⁴ Savannah’s population, after all, breasted a mere 28,000 in 1870. So it is quite true that Ryan’s newspapers sold handsomely by regional standards.¹³⁵

Much of Ryan’s cachet expired with the Lost Cause. Michael Kenny, S.J., seemed a little bemused when he wrote in 1928, “‘The Conquered Banner’ [was] sung or declaimed in

every Southern home and school by the post-war generation, but now is rarely heard in Dixie.”¹³⁶ It is quite possible that rising anti-Catholic sentiment also limited Ryan’s reclaim, both in poetic and historical circles. Of the one-hundred-plus entries in Ryan’s *Poems*, more than seventy-five touch on religious themes.

Even so, Ryan was probably the most-read Lost Cause poet. Timrod, Lanier, and various other sentimentalists all made their contributions, but only Ryan wrote expressly to promote Lost Cause principles in his poetry. Yet Ryan’s life was utterly tragic, according to his own brooding accounts and by any objective measure. Worse, his was in many ways an *unsuccessful* life. He abrogated the gospel of peace in order to cry the havoc of war, and turned away from his vows of obedience. He made a more likely warrior than a poet, and finding himself precluded from war, he bent his brother toward his own political ends, thus inculcating himself in his death. He never found his brother’s remains, which would have been a small palliative for his grief. He believed in two causes, the Roman Catholic Church and the Confederacy, and one of them failed utterly. So he championed a lost cause and doomed himself to historical ignominy for the role he played in its checkered legacy of selective forgetfulness, ensuring that his epitaphs would be written by the dreamy and uncritical defenders of a great catastrophe. His one genuine romantic interest was thwarted and left to smolder in a cautious game of Victorian pen pals; if he pursued it, he vitiated his vow of chastity. He saw very little of his surviving family, perhaps because he was incapable of fully acknowledging his roots. His willfulness alienated him from his clerical peers and spiritual home. Though he became a southern icon, he was left to grasp for the respect of grief-crippled and embittered southerners who were “firing their sunset cannons” (to borrow Walker Percy’s phrase), and whose tolerance for Catholicism waned in the postwar years. In

the ultimate apostasy of his first faith, Ryan may have involved himself with the first incarnation of the country's leading group of muddleheaded hatemongers. He was a self-described gypsy who careered wildly from the peaks of manic productivity to the valleys of incapacitating—it is evident—despair and infirmity. His gift for writing languished in his service to feckless political fealties.

In 1883 he wrote “Louis B. James” once more: “...I fear I am becoming too grave as I near the vesper of a life that has borne some kind of a shadow since its morning.” Within the isolation of his cottage on the lapping Gulf Shore, he had plenty of time to reflect on the shadows. At some sorry point, Ryan became his melancholia. What is melancholy, but excessive and groundless brooding? “The boy was full of moods,” he wrote of his childhood self; as a man, he sought “the glory in gloom.”¹³⁷ If a sense of grievance is, as Sheldon Hackney has suggested, the defining characteristic of white southerners, then Ryan was southern indeed.

But now we arrive at Father Ryan, the man, at last. And it is from the depths—*de profundis*—that he is best approached. He acknowledged his manifold failings, his imperfect ministry, and the desultory nature of his writing. He mitigated his unreconstructed ways, to the extent that he allowed a conciliatory poem to enter his legacy. Ryan sometimes succumbed to southern hatreds, but other times explored the loftiest calling of his art, pushing himself to find new ways of expressing the mysterious love of his faith. He honored his vows of poverty and was known for his unstinting generosity toward orphans (as one would expect of a disciple of Saint Vincent de Paul). He was generally penniless, and his generosity led him to borrow against his own debts. He was something of a parochial rainmaker who carried out numerous lecture tours for diocesan debt retirement, passing the

hat wherever he went. Ryan founded a sodality for children in Mobile and in one letter mentions “Philip, a French boy I have taken in to raise [at *Sea Rest*].” The boy was twelve in 1882, and Ryan reported that he hunted and played cards with his charge.



Illustration 22. Saint Vincent de Paul with a foundling.¹³⁸

And he did succeed in earning the reputation of a southern patriot, fit to share the stage with Davis and worthy of being borne to his grave by high-ranking Confederate officers. He edited what was likely the most widely-read newspaper devoted exclusively to

trimming the “vestal wick” over the grave of the Lost Cause, and, by infusing its ideology with a fallen Catholic worldview, disseminated its civic religion over a broad swath.

As the conservative critic and latter-day fugitive Richard Weaver observed, ideas do have consequences. Ryan’s was a mind made for strong ideas, and his life is a reminder that consuming ideas may of themselves become consumptive. Ryan could never stand accused of being lukewarm, one of those “neither hot nor cold” that Jesus warns he will spit from his mouth. His faith gave him a way out. As a Catholic in a world twice fallen, a life frustrated was a life vindicated (“Life is a cross; bear it”). That is well, for his unhappy career. Like many of those who are inclined to lofty ideals and intellectual absolutes, he postured in defiance and felt justified. To what degree did Catholicism, and to what degree did southern Irishness, set him going against the grain?

Like most southern Irish religious, Ryan cast his lot with the people he served. A kindred spirit, Father Jeremiah O’Neill, Sr., stepped forward at a Savannah rally, and blasted Lincoln the “Black Republican.” He announced in his native Irish accent that he was “a *rapublican* and a *sacesionist* and a *satizen* of Georgia.” Come to that, if seceding required it, “he would be the first ‘to *lade* them into battle.’”¹³⁹ O’Neill was something of a local hero, and inviting him to speak was a shrewd calculation on the part of the organizers, since no one was better qualified to catalyze the city’s substantial immigrant Irish population.

O’Neill and Ryan were cut of the same cloth. What Citizen Ryan really craved, as a first-generation American, was not the America that rejected him and his faith, but another country. At long last, he got it. Father Ryan was assumed into Lost Cause heaven, where he is seated at the right hand of Lee. And he has not been seen since.

Notes

- ¹ No one has every promulgated a thorough-going, book-length study of Ryan, although a few students have tried, and a few longer monographs can be tracked down. The forensic record for Ryan scholarship is—in a word—thin. For those who would stitch together a narrative of Ryan's life, there are dozens of newspaper accounts and brief bios that circulate the same inaccuracies. Having sifted through many of these, and (I feel confident) most of the secondary accounts, I offer this review of the most useful sources:
- 1) Bernadette Oldemoppen was an amateur local historian who died in the late 1990's. Oldemoppen had a considerable advantage when she wrote *Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet*, and it wasn't her pro-Confederate jingoism: she probably held the largest private collection of Ryan papers. Oldemoppen offers almost no documentation, and at times her chronology is disordered. Yet her book is remarkably accurate in many respects. Quirky, charmingly antiquated, and opinionated, Ms. Oldemoppen's prose style clearly derives from the culturally Victorian, Southern society that produced her. For example, she restates Archimedes' postulate about levers ("Give me a lever and a weight to support it and I will life the world itself") and W.R. Wallace ("The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world"). Her conclusions are all her own, and expound a southern feminist principle: "Combining these two great axioms to make a spiritual axiom is could also be said: Give me a society of women imbued with the love of God and I will revolutionize the world (54)." Despite the lack of in-text documentation, Oldemoppen catalogues many of her clippings and sources at the book's end. Her sources are a closer remove to Ryan's time and culture, and her bibliography will stand future Ryan researchers well, particularly in its record of hard-to-find materials. Ms. Oldemoppen's collection has been donated to Mobile's Spring Hill College, which holds itself out as "The Jesuit College of the South." The reader must decide if emphasis falls on "*The*." 2) Sr. Mary Josephine Donnallan, of Milwaukee, Wisconsin, met Ryan when she was a young woman, and corresponded with him until his death. Like many in her day, Donnallan was a scrapbooking enthusiast and great sentimentalist. Donnallan tracked down every imaginable bit of Ryan ephemera and saved it—articles, even *memento mori* such as flowers from his graveside garland. Some of her memorabilia includes correspondence with Ryan's familiars, including of his sisters, Eliza Ryan. Toward the end of her own life, Sr. Donnallan turned her collection over to Fr. Joseph McKey (1875-1938) who further enlarged it through his own independent research. Father Joseph McKey was enthralled with Ryan. He made a go at a biography and collected quite a lot of material, now housed in the Belmont Abbey collection. Unfortunately, McKey wasn't much of an archivist, and the majority of his collection is imperfectly documented, if at all. Driven, it seems, by a need to preserve his own sanity, he pasted together several chronologies of Ryan's life, revising them as new (and conflicting) information arose. McKey may have been a bit too much in thrall of Ryan; in an otherwise apparently regular chapter on Ryan's life, he switches to the first person, and imaginatively re-lives Ryan's death bed scene, replete with auditory hallucinations, etc.—a curious specimen of the Catholic drive for self-sacrifice. McKey, who spent most of his career in the North, was a tireless promoter of Ryan's work during his life, and even held

recitations where Ryan's poems and their musical settings were performed. McKey left behind a substantial and valuable, if fragmented, archive. 3) In a letter dated February 3, 1929, University of Chicago graduate student Ada Law wrote to McKey with a canny sense of urgency. "I feel that now is the time," she said of her thesis-in-progress, a "critical biography" of Ryan. "The people who knew him personally, which factor is most valuable in a work of this kind, are few; and in a few years shall have passed away." What Law lacked in writing ability she made up for in tenacity. She contacted a number of sources still within living memory of Ryan, and in the process, compiled a remarkably accurate record. Some of the Ryan ephemera listed in her sources would probably have fallen into total obscurity absent her scrutiny. Law has a bobby-socks interest in Ryan's affair, and she is given to breathy encomiums of United Daughters of the Confederacy vintage. Nevertheless, from Law's intrepid paper trail emerges a useful resource. 4) Ed Gleeson's *Erin Go Gray!* (1997) offers a chapter on Ryan which contains some errors of fact, and makes a number of sweeping historical judgments. He demonstrably misinterprets some of the items in the Belmont Abbey Father Ryan archive. Although Gleeson writes in an authoritative tone, and in a documentary vein, he sails close to the wind, and perhaps even forges some of his evidence. In my estimation, then, this is a book to be approached with great caution. 5) Monsignor Charles Boldrick attempted to dispense with some of the Ryan balderdash in an article that appeared in the *Filson Club History Quarterly* in July, 1972. Boldrick's article is quite useful in its way, although his documentation runs thin, and he comes in on the side of Norfolk for Ryan's birthplace. 6) Louis Joseph Maloof wrote his thesis on Ryan for his M.A. in journalism at the University of Georgia. Maloof's work is hero-worship that verges on out-and-out deification, reduced to its absurd extremes (he also produced a radio program dramatically re-imagining Ryan's life). He consistently misinterprets evidence and contradicts himself in order to portray Ryan as spotless (e.g., he states that "it is significant that not a single instance has been found where he, or his religion, was attacked by a Southern minister," when he devotes a section to the heated exchange between Ryan and the *Methodist Advocate*). His politics are poisonous, e.g., this matter-of-fact statement, on the heels of Maloof's own slavery apologetic: "Southern white women were no longer safe in their own homes. Even small white girls became the victims of frenzied ex-slaves, not only unaware of what freedom meant but also totally ignorant of the fact that freedom binds and is restricted by law. Law? But there was no law!" (272) Maloof has compiled perhaps the most complete listing of early Ryan resources yet available, and culled many passages from other media that document Ryan's public image. In these very qualified terms, his study is useful. (6) The arch-resource for Ryan—scholarly, thoroughly documented from archival research, and contextually thoughtful—is Rev. John Charles Bowes' dissertation in history, *Glory in Gloom: Abram J. Ryan, Southern Catholicism, and the Lost Cause* (1996). Bowes' dissertation is not free from error; he muddles some of his Civil War chronology, for instance. But his is the most scholarly extant examination of Ryan's life. Bowes' wide reading in Ryan's lesser-known essays and his training in Catholic theology and history are considerable assets in this valuable study. Bowes concludes on a telling note: "If I were to start over, I would focus most of my energy on the life and works of Abram Ryan. It seems to me that there is more than enough material to focus on this alone by presenting them in their historical context as a unique contribution both to American Catholicism and southern culture."

All of these authors are aware of Ryan's short-lived post mortem lionization, and all admit the difficulty of separating fact from fiction.

² In charting the canonical expansion of recent years, Fred Hobson explains, "What we have seen in the past two or three decades, then—and it has been said so often it has become a cliché—is an expansion of the American literary canon and, for our purposes, the southern canon. The canon has expanded for two reasons, one literary, the other extraliterary, although the two can hardly be separated... [I]t has become clear that the tools of the literary scholar might be applied to forms of American writing other than fiction, poetry, and drama. Through this means, various southern works—James Agee's *Let Us Now Praise Famous Men*, William Alexander Percy's *Lanterns on the Levee*, Lillian Smith's *Killers of the Dream*, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin's *The Making of a Southerner*, even Cash's *Mind of the South*—that once were read, if at all, in social and intellectual history classes have been deemed worthy of study in southern literature courses. And not only those works but, more important in a social and cultural sense, the narratives of Frederick Douglass, Harriet Jacobs, Hurston, and others."

³ H. J. Heagney, *Chaplain in Gray, Abram Ryan, Poet-Priest of the Confederacy*, American Background Books ; 6 (New York,: Kenedy, 1958).

⁴ Wyatt-Brown, *Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition* 122.

⁵ Admittedly, the hearsay of clergy is still hearsay, and the issue was sufficiently vexed that in 1959 Edward Egan, an amateur historian from Chicago, was induced to visit the Ryan Club of Norfolk to set the record straight. The *Norfolk-Ledger-Dispatch* headline chortled, "It Was Hagerstown," and the *Virginian-Pilot*, more wistfully, "Norfolk Loses Father Ryan."⁵ No doubt it posed something of a problem for the United Daughters of the Confederacy in Norfolk. The local chapter had erected a sturdy monument at Elmwood cemetery to the poet-priest, the pediment of which identified the port as "his native city." Oral tradition in Norfolk nurtured Ryan's association with the town, specific to a particular house.

⁶ Bowes says that the family immigrated "sometime after 1828" (100). Gleeson gives the year as 1836 (56).

⁷ Fogarty, Gerald. "Virginia." Michael Glazier, *The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999) 928-30.

⁸ Ambrose Maréchal and Archbishop Corp Author: Catholic Church. Archdiocese of Baltimore, *Pastoral Letter of the Archbishop of Baltimore to the Roman Catholics of Norfolk, Virginia*, Variation: Early American Imprints (Baltimore.: J. Robinson, 1819).

⁹ Bernadette Greenwood Oldemoppen, *Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet* (Mobile, Ala.: Southeastern Press, 1992) 6.

- ¹⁰ McKey, History of Niagara University, Seminary of Our Lady of Angels, 1856-1931.
- ¹¹ Don Beagle, "Ryan, Beauregard, and Bragg: New Research from the Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive," Catholic Library World 74.3 (2004).
- ¹² One hastens to add that Maryland was culturally and sympathetically quite "southern," however. Baltimore joined the agricultural south with the commercial North, and it showed influences of both. An Irish American from Baltimore, James Ryder Randall, penned "Maryland, My Maryland," which became a Confederate war hymn, and as I have demonstrated, Roger Taney edged the country toward war with states rights' and pro-slavery precedents.
- ¹³ Marsha Lynne Fuller, St. Mary's Catholic Church Records, 1818-1900, Hagerstown, Washington County, Maryland (Westminster: Md. Willow Bend Books, 2002).
- ¹⁴ "The custom of giving a new name to the candidate is not obligatory; but it has the sanction of several synodal decrees during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The Fifth Council of Milan, under St. Charles Borromeo, insisted that a candidate whose name was 'vile, ridiculous, or quite unbecoming for a Christian' should receive another at Confirmation."—From "Confirmation," The Catholic Encyclopedia (1910 ed.)
- ¹⁵ "True, he leaves no family to bear his name and wear its honors, for none are begotten of his flesh and blood. But by the power of his spirit...he had begotten into Christ's family an offspring not born of the will or the flesh....No wonder, simply, and yet for reason deep, is the Roman Catholic priest called,—"Father." Abram Joseph Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention (New York: D. & J. Sadlier, 1886) 220.
- ¹⁶ Michael Fellman, Inside War : The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989) 6. The book takes an illuminating look at Missouri's painful divisions and the persistent problem of guerilla fighting.
- ¹⁷ Fellman, Inside War : The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War 5.
- ¹⁸ "Gutta percha": an archaic term for rubber. The quotes are from Fellman, Inside War : The Guerrilla Conflict in Missouri During the American Civil War 13-17.
- ¹⁹ Indeed, historians who ponder the classic Civil War chestnut—*Why did the yeoman fight?*—might do well to re-examine the case of the Missouri pukes.
- ²⁰ Oldemoppen, Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet 5-6.
- ²¹ Louis B. James, "Father Ryan," The Rosary Magazine XI (1897).

- ²² John C. Bowes, "Glory in Gloom : Abram J. Ryan, Southern Catholicism, and the Lost Cause," Dissertation, Saint Louis University, 1996, 102.
- ²³ Letter from Ryan to Father Mariano Maller, C.M., 10 April 1862 (in the DeAndreis-Rosati Memorial Archives of the Midwest Province of the Congregation of the Mission, Perrville, Missouri), as quoted in Bowes, "Glory in Gloom : Abram J. Ryan, Southern Catholicism, and the Lost Cause," 106.
- ²⁴ Sons of the South attended class alongside the children of William Tecumseh Sherman, one of whom would become a priest—to his father's everlasting discomfit. (Sherman would confide in a letter to a family member, "I can't get over Tom. Why should they have taken my splendid boy? They could have brought over thirty priests from Italy in his place.")
- ²⁵ Beagle, "Ryan, Beauregard, and Bragg: New Research from the Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive."
- ²⁶ The incident is described in Irby Morgan, How It Was: Four Years among the Rebels (Nashville, Tenn.. Printed for the author. Publishing house Methodist Episcopal church South., 1892) 16. Beauregard was making his valedictorian tour. T. Harry Williams' 1954 biography of Beauregard also mentions the shared platform.
- ²⁷ Ryan is in the upper row, center. From the Father Ryan Archive at Belmont Abbey College.
- ²⁸ From Griffith, *Meagher of the Sword*.
- ²⁹ Population of Great Britain & Ireland 1570-1931, Available: <http://www.gendocs.demon.co.uk/pop.html>. Ireland remains a small country. The 2002 Irish Census tallied 3,858,495 souls.
- ³⁰ Farrell O'Gorman, "Peculiar Crossroads : Flannery O'connor, Walker Percy, and Catholic Vision in Postwar Southern Fiction," 2000.
- ³¹ Louis-Hippolyte Gache and Cornelius M. Buckley, A Frenchman, a Chaplain, a Rebel : The War Letters of Pere Louis-Hippolyte Gache, S.J (Chicago: Loyola University Press, 1981).
- ³² John Mitchel, Jail Journal, or, Five Years in British Prisons Commenced on Board the Shearwater Steamer, Office of the "Citizen", New York, 1854.
- ³³ As quoted in O'Grady, Clear the Confederate Way! : The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia 39.

³⁴ Notes on the Princess Grace Irish Library, Monaco, Available: http://www.pgil-eirdata.org/html/pgil_datasets/authors/m/Mitchel,J/life.htm.

³⁵ He recorded that a visiting neighbor asked him, "Was it true as we have hearn, that the water of the sea is all salted?" *The Loyal Volunteers of Tennessee* (1888) makes sport of the Irishman in an exchange between two mountain men:

"Who is this stranger, anyhow? He don't do nuthin' only him and his son go fishin' and shootin'."

"O," another replied, "don't you know who that is? That's John Mitchel, the exile of the British government?"

"British government indeed!" said the first speaker. "I thought we had whipped that consarn out long ago."

Thomas William Humes, The Loyal Mountaineers of Tennessee (Knoxville: Ogden Brothers & Co., 1888) 29.

³⁶ O'Grady, Clear the Confederate Way! : The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia 41.

³⁷ The capitalist critique, on his part, is perhaps more easily forgiven if one considers that Ireland's class divisions furnished Mitchel with plenty of (the pun must be pardoned) material. In this analysis he shared common ground with George Fitzhugh, another notorious blowhard.

³⁸ Indeed, he had received the telegram informing him of his son's death on 20 July 1864. The purblind Irishman had been volunteering that summer around Richmond in the ambulance corps, and he had been able to visit with his son John during the grinding attrition at Petersburg. It seems quite possible that he could have met Ryan at Missionary Ridge not many months later, particularly as the front shifted. Thomas Keneally, The Great Shame : And the Triumph of the Irish in the English-Speaking World, 1st in the U.S.A. ed. (New York: Nan A. Talese, 1999) 392.

³⁹ Allen W. Trelease, White Terror : The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction, Louisiana pbk. ed. (Louisiana State University Press, 1995) 65-68.

⁴⁰ MS, 18 Apr. 1875

⁴¹ Don Beagle, The Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive at Belmont Abbey College, Available: <http://www.bac.edu/library/rarebooks/Ryanfiles/>.

⁴² Hélène Roederer Bailly de Barberey and Mary Coyle O'Neil, Mother Elizabeth Ann Seton (Emmitsburg, Md.: Mother Seton Guild, 1927).

⁴³ The book is *Froude's Crusade: Both Sides*.

- ⁴⁴ Of course, there are always other possibilities. Mitchel might have written it and attributed it to Ryan for reasons unknown. But these other scenarios seem much more likely.
- ⁴⁵ McKey, History of Niagara University, Seminary of Our Lady of Angels, 1856-1931 169.
- ⁴⁶ The date of his death is affirmed both by McKey's research and military records.
- ⁴⁷ Available digitally, Don Beagle, The Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive at Belmont Abbey College, 2003, Available: <http://www.bac.edu/library/rarebooks/Ryanfiles/>.
<http://www.bac.edu/library/rarebooks/Ryanfiles/letterlist.htm>
- ⁴⁸ Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention 201.
- ⁴⁹ "Lecture on Modern Civilization," The Baltimore Sun Dec. 11 1880.
- ⁵⁰ Louis Joseph Maloof, "Abram J. Ryan, the Editor," Dissertation, University of Georgia, 1950, 354-55.
- ⁵¹ And these conflicts are recurring. North Carolina Bishop John Gossman recently fired John Strange, the editor of the official Diocesan news organ, *NC Catholic*, for Strange's comments intimating that the priesthood should accept women and married men. The conflicting opinion touched a matter of doctrine, but Strange had maintained a lively letters-to-the-editor section that aired criticism of the paper, the church, himself, and the Gossman. Cf., *National Catholic Reporter*, 9 Jan 2004, "Bishop Fires Diocesan Editor."
- ⁵² 10 Oct 1868. Abram Joseph Ryan, The Banner of the South 1868-1870.
- ⁵³ At this point, I scarcely need to add that Quinlan was born in Ireland.
- ⁵⁴ Source unknown.
- ⁵⁵ Abram Joseph Ryan, James Howell Hewlett and Nelle Gaboury Disney, An Unknown Poem by Father Ryan (1929) 4.
- ⁵⁶ Ryan averred to have written it in Knoxville. Cf., Oldemoppen, Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet 79.
- ⁵⁷ I am again indebted to Don Beagle for sharing this article with me.
- ⁵⁸ In one of his letters he described his special powers: "*Aloof* means contempt, *apart* means pity. And why not *aloof* and yet *apart*? Easy to answer. I have mingled more with *women* than with *men*. And the consequence? It is simple and seen. My heart is fresher and purer. I look at things from a *woman's* standpoint. My very temperament is *feminine*, not *effeminate*. I have their intuition, and hence I have a strange power over *men*. I never lose a friend worth having. To *men* I am like a woman in tenderness and fidelity."

- ⁵⁹ Bowes, "Glory in Gloom : Abram J. Ryan, Southern Catholicism, and the Lost Cause," 119.
- ⁶⁰ Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention 147.
- ⁶¹ From The Nashville Tennessean Magazine, February 2, 1958.
- ⁶² James Gordon Coogler once sniffed, "Oh you critics!—if an author errs in a single line/That line you'll surely quote,/And will give it as a sample fair/Of all he ever wrote." The South Carolina-born poetaster achieved a strange sort of celebrity within his lifetime, scribbling his deathless verses whilst his patrons snickered in their sleeves. An unadoring public was just one of the unhappy circumstances that Coogler faced. When his father died in 1880, young J. Gordon was left to provide for his mother and two sisters, a duty he discharged with filial devotion. He ceremoniously hung up his shingle and thus became the first (and probably last) poet-for-hire in South Carolina. The placard in his shop-window announced simply: Poems Written While You Wait.
- ⁶³ Cf., Burns' "Behold, My Love, How Green The Groves":
 "The lav'rock shuns the palace gay,
 And o'er the cottage sings:
 For Nature smiles as sweet, I ween,
 To Shepherds as to Kings."
- ⁶⁴ Robert Bain, Whitman's & Dickinson's Contemporaries an Anthology of Their Verse (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1996).
- ⁶⁵ From Beagle's essay, "Poetics, Politics, and the Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive." Available <http://www.bac.edu/library/rarebooks/Ryanfiles/essay2.htm>
- ⁶⁶ Fort Moultrie was named for John Moultrie's (1799-1874) great uncle.
- ⁶⁷ Fred C. Hobson, Tell About the South : The Southern Rage to Explain, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983) 139-40.
- ⁶⁸ From an unpublished essay, BAC. I have chosen the unpublished essay to draw attention to the resources of this wonderful archive. Ryan airs the same views, sometimes more eloquently, in his various columns.
- ⁶⁹ Gary W. Gallagher and Alan T. Nolan, The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000) 11-34.
- ⁷⁰ Gallagher and Nolan, The Myth of the Lost Cause and Civil War History 2.
- ⁷¹ Louis B. James p. 490

⁷² I cannot claim to have read *all* of the editorials, though. Don Beagle digitally photographed the editorial page of three years of *The Banner*, which represents Ryan's contribution to the journal; otherwise, *The Banner* would live only in dusty archives. I was not so fortunate with *The Pacificator*; Duke is one of just three libraries in the world that have copies of it. In fact, they had lost them until I happened upon a batch mixed in a bin of other war-era papers. Very few copies of the short-lived paper have survived. As to the third newspaper that Ryan edited, *The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger*, it was easier to find. Duke has the full run on microfilm, and so do about twenty other libraries, but microfilm is a difficult medium for casual perusal. Don Beagle hopes to eventually OCR scan most of Ryan's *Banner* editorials so that we might perform in-text keyword searches, and have a more definitive sense of Ryan's views by topic.

⁷³ O'Grady, Clear the Confederate Way! : The Irish in the Army of Northern Virginia 41.

⁷⁴ "Baltimore as Commercial Center of the South," *Banner*, Nov. 6 1869.

⁷⁵ Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention.

⁷⁶ Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention 153.

⁷⁷ *Banner of the South*, 24 April 1869.

⁷⁸ Ryan, A Catholic Convention of One Versus the Cincinnati Presbyterian Convention 145.

⁷⁹ Cf., "What Will Become of the Negro?"

⁸⁰ Oldemoppen, Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet 33.

⁸¹ As with Ryan's other pages, there is a problem of attribution. Editorial comment, anonymous guest columns, and unattributed "reports" mingled promiscuously on Ryan's broadsheet, perhaps by design, since the cumulative effect was one rambling editorial. It appears that Ryan edited the *Morning Star* largely from his Mobile residence, and it is often difficult to tell which columns he had a hand in writing *in absentia*—especially because Ryan did not sign off on his own material. *The Morning Star* courted Ryan's celebrity, and he coquettishly continued his freewheeling ways, ducking away for weeks, and sometimes months at a time. Obviously, once Ryan's name was at the top of the masthead, he had final say in substantive matters. The news he ran was highly selective, heavily weighted toward various pro-southern controversies and developments in the Catholic Church and Ireland.

⁸² Glazier, The Encyclopedia of the Irish in America 644-49.

⁸³ *The Atlanta Intelligencer*, March 18, 1870, and *The Banner of the South*, March 26, 1870.

⁸⁴ Don Carlos Seitz, The Dreadful Decade: Detailing Some Phases in the History of the United States from Reconstruction to Resumption, 1869-1879 (Indianapolis: The Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1926) 32.

⁸⁵ Strange bedfellows: the Masons have taken an interest in discrediting Davis's book because it include Albert Pike as a Klan leader. Of course, there are documentable instances where Klan members and Masons operated, hand-in-glove. Cf., http://freemasonry.bcy.ca/anti-masonry/davis_sl.html

⁸⁶ The clandestine nature of the group bred a good deal of misinformation, even in its academic study, and Trelease writes truly when he notes that "there was a tendency after a generation or so to sanctify the Klan along with the Lost Cause and to make it more widespread, more fully organized, more highly connected, and more noble than it actually was." Besides, early provisions in the Klan's Prescript specifically provided that "the origin, designs, mysteries and ritual of this * shall never be written, but . . . shall be communicated orally." It is interesting that the term "mysteries" is used, because it has an especially Catholic meaning. In Ryan's case, Davis gives her proof to wit:

I was informed by Richard H. Wilmer [an Episcopalian Bishop] that he was Chaplain of the Ku Klux Klan for the Realm of Alabama, and that Father Abram Ryan was the Chaplain of the "Invisible Empire." This last fact was also given me by Mrs. Josephine Upshaw, a Catholic, who was a close friend of Father Ryan, and by Mrs. Henry J. Pepin, a Catholic, at whose home the Ku Klux Klan held meetings attended by Father Ryan, at Athens, Alabama, and by Colonel Sumner A. Cunningham... I was also given the fact that Father Ryan was Chaplain of the "Invisible Empire" by General John B. Gordon [Forrest's "right hand man," according to Seitz] and other Ku Klux Klansmen.

⁸⁷ Trelease, White Terror : The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction 20.

⁸⁸ "Brownlow's most enduring and formidable enemy was Andrew Johnson, the leader of the East Tennessee Democrats. Brownlow and Johnson shared many characteristics. Both had risen from obscurity, both resented the influence of large slaveholders over Southern politics, and both were passionately devoted to the interests of East Tennessee....Brownlow encountered Johnson directly in politics only once, when both were candidates for the First District congressional seat. Brownlow lost that contest decisively, and he developed a certain respect for Johnson's political skills. But Brownlow never gave up attempts to damage the Democratic leader. He not only attacked Johnson's political views but also portrayed him as morally unfit to hold office. Brownlow accused Johnson of being an atheist, an infidel, and a Catholic. He further claimed that Johnson beat his wife, regularly visited prostitutes, and drank heavily. Finally, in a favorite charge, Brownlow exploited Johnson's obscure past and accused him of being illegitimate." Noel C. Fisher, War at Every Door : Partisan Politics and Guerrilla Violence in East Tennessee, 1860-1869, Civil War America (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997) 14.

- ⁸⁹ The expansive title of one of his books sums up his views: *Americanism Contrasted with Foreignism, Romanism, and Bogus Democracy, in the Light of Reason, History, and Scripture; in Which Certain Demagogues in Tennessee, and Elsewhere, Are Shown up in Their True Colors* (1856).
- ⁹⁰ Here depicted as all-American patriot in an undated postcard from the Library of Congress.
- ⁹¹ The latter rivaled Christianity in popularity within the Roman Empire for centuries. Indeed, its philosophical congruence with Christianity made light work for early Christian evangelists.
- ⁹² Pierre G.T. Beauregard must have been the last to hear about it, because he was a well-known Freemason. Priests may have clucked over his involvement in a secret society which had always defined itself in opposition to Catholicity, but his celebrity status was a good draw for filling pews. Catholic participation in major Civil War veteran organizations in the North was curtailed by the Church's suspicion that the Grand Army of the Republican was a quasi-Masonic secret society. Cf., Miller, Stout and Wilson, Religion and the American Civil War 285.
- ⁹³ Trelease, White Terror : The Ku Klux Klan Conspiracy and Southern Reconstruction 5.
- ⁹⁴ Ibid, 4.
- ⁹⁵ I am certainly not the first to tender the observation; Richard Wright was chilled by the sight in *Pagan Spain* and James Michener remarked the similarity in *Iberia*. It may be mere coincidence; illustrations of such processions could have cropped up in innumerable works exposing a thriving nineteenth century readership to exotic cultures abroad. The more interesting, and probably unanswerable, question is, how did the Klan come to copy the design?
- ⁹⁶ From the North Carolina State Archives and *The American Experience*
http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/grant/peopleevents/e_colfax.html
- ⁹⁷ "Some time since there was considerable talk about a 'War of Races,' but the war was all on the side of the whites. The freedman has succumbed to brute force, and hence the war of races is suspended; but let him attempt to assert his rights of citizenship, as the white man does at the North, according to the dictates of his own conscience and sense of duty, and the bloody hands of the Ku-Klux and White Leaguer will appear in all their horrors once more—the 'dream that has passed' would become a sad reality again." William Wells Brown, My Southern Home; or, the South and Its People (Boston: A.G. Brown, 1880).
- ⁹⁸ According to Maloof, the article ran on March 18, 1970. I have yet to confirm it. Maloof, "Abram J. Ryan, the Editor," 275.

⁹⁹ "The Morning Star and Catholic Messenger," (New Orleans [La.]: New Orleans Catholic Pub. Co.,; United States; Louisiana; Orleans; New Orleans.), vol., Aug 9 1975 p 4.

¹⁰⁰ Bowes, "Glory in Gloom : Abram J. Ryan, Southern Catholicism, and the Lost Cause," 115.

¹⁰¹ Beagle, The Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive at Belmont Abbey College.

¹⁰² David Mark Chalmers, Hooded Americanism: The History of the Ku Klux Klan, 3rd ed. (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987) 202-12.

¹⁰³ Thomas Stritch, The Catholic Church in Tennessee : The Sesquicentennial Story (Nashville: Catholic Center, 1987) 310.

¹⁰⁴ So great was Ryan's cult of devotion that "one of Tennessee's most popular priests from 1920 to his death in 1980," was named by his mother for a character in "Their Story Runneth Thus." Poor Monsignor Merlin F. Kearney no doubt had his work cut out for him in defending Catholicism from charges of *hocus pocus* (a phrase which comes from Reformation parody of the words of transubstantiation, *Hic est corpus*, or "here is the body"). Cf., Stritch, The Catholic Church in Tennessee : The Sesquicentennial Story 154.

¹⁰⁵ Beagle, "Ryan, Beauregard, and Bragg: New Research from the Fr. Abram J. Ryan Archive."

¹⁰⁶ P. 490 Louis B. James

¹⁰⁷ Felicity Allen, Jefferson Davis, Unconquerable Heart, Shades of Blue and Gray Series (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 544.

¹⁰⁸ Good-hearted Dominican dominies educated Davis at St. Thomas College, a Catholic boys' school. "From whatever reason," he later recalled, "the priests were particularly kind to me." As their only Protestant charge, he might have been in for special treatment. In fact, young Davis considered converting, perhaps to blend in with his peers. He approached Father Thomas Wilson about it, and found him eating a simple meal. When Davis introduced the subject of conversion, he seems to have adjudged the boy too immature for such soulful decision-making. "The kindly priest, soon to become another of the boy's idols, smiled and told him that conversion was a serious matter that could wait and handed over a biscuit and a bit of cheese, suggesting that Davis be satisfied with 'some Catholic food.'"¹⁰⁸ Years later, the Davises chose an Irish domestic named Catharine to tend to Jefferson Davis, Jr., in the Confederate White House.

Davis "was a personal friend of Irish Vicksburgers such as William Porterfield," and favorably impressed by the victories that Irish troops brought to his desk. As a freshman congressman from Mississippi, Davis had "earned a measure of fame" when he backed the Irish against nativist lawmakers who pushed for stricter naturalization. Abhorring them for their "sordid character and [arrogant] assumption," Jefferson answered with the suggestion

that a change in law should only make “the process of naturalization more easily accomplished.” Had Jefferson been able to induce more Irish immigration to the South, it would have been one of his savvier political moves. Even so, he capitalized on the loyalty and drive of southern Irish.

In fact, he empanelled one of them in his cabinet. Stephen Russell Mallory, born in Trinidad and educated at the Jesuit College at Spring Hill, Mobile, was Jefferson’s sole Catholic appointee, and served as the Secretary of the Navy of the Southern Confederacy. The lack of a single ammunition-manufacturing facility had not stopped the Confederate States from breaking away, and the lack of any naval stores or indeed a naval vessel did not stop Mallory from building a navy. The slogan of the Confederate Navy was *Aide toi et Dieu t'aidera*, more familiarly, “God helps those who help themselves.” The grand hero of his navy, Ralph Semmes, descended from one of Maryland’s early Anglo-Catholic families. Father Ryan presided over Semmes’ funeral; the two were friends, and they are interred near each other in Oaklawn, Mobile’s Catholic cemetery.

Stephen Mallory discharged his duties until the bitter end (a fittingly nautical term that comes from running out of rope), gently pressing Davis, who was deep in denial, to surrender (Mallory recorded his incredulity when Davis opened a meeting of the fleeing cabinet, one step ahead of its captors, with his habitual light recollections and anecdotes). He coordinated naval support for Davis’ escape during the last frantic days of the Confederate government, accompanied him during the flight, and when that failed, awaited arrest with his family in Georgia. Similarly, Sergeant Joseph O’Toole helped arrange Breckinridge’s flight to Cuba.¹⁰⁸

And when at last Davis was sent up to Federal imprisonment, Charles O’Conor, an Irish Catholic Copperhead lawyer from New York, stepped forward as his bondsman and defender. (O’Conor was later nominated Straight Out Democratic candidate for the presidency.)

¹⁰⁹ In Sister Donallan’s scrapbook, BAC.

¹¹⁰ BS, 11 Sept 1869

¹¹¹ From the Belmont Abbey Archive.

¹¹² Both quotes are from the publication notice for the Baltimore edition of Ryan’s collected Poems, BAC.

¹¹³ “Readings by the Poet-Priest--Tributes from Longfellow and Others,” The Baltimore Sun Dec. 18 1880. The letter is also reprinted in Henry Wadsworth Longfellow and Andrew R. Hilen, The Letters of Henry Wadsworth Longfellow (Cambridge,: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1966).

¹¹⁴ Hughes and Ware, Theodore O'hara : Poet-Soldier of the Old South 95.

¹¹⁵ “We are here...to execute upon these remains...that consecrating judgement of ancient Egypt, which, upon a sever trial of her greatest worthies after death, and a cold scrutiny of

heir whole lives, admitted those of spotless fame and of the loftiest worth to the sublime repose of her everlasting pyramids.” The legalistic tenor of these lines evinces O’Hara’s training at the bar.

¹¹⁶ Later, O’Hara’s fascination outspoken advocacy of slavery carried him to Cuba on Narciso López’s abortive filibuster. He was shot in the legs for his trouble, a scarred veteran of an early attempt at southern colonial annexation, but nevertheless joined in the clamor for Nicaragua, another ill-starred effort.

¹¹⁷ While O’Hara edited the *Mobile Daily Register*—and contended with the Know-Nothing hooliganism rampant in his new town—he reportedly went on one of his many benders, and in a belligerent soak, whipped out his pistol and fired some shots at a goat standing in the road for no very good reason. Hughes and Ware, Theodore O'hara : Poet-Soldier of the Old South 138.

¹¹⁸ The answer, of course, is a handful of shattered souls, lost in what Dickey termed the “dark, satanic mills” of graduate school.

¹¹⁹ From the frontispiece of *Poems of James Ryder Randall* (1910).

¹²⁰ Florence J. O'Connor, The Heroine of the Confederacy, or, Truth and Justice (New Orleans: A. Eyrich, 1869) 356.

¹²¹ O'Connor, The Heroine of the Confederacy, or, Truth and Justice 15.

¹²² O'Connor, The Heroine of the Confederacy, or, Truth and Justice 302-3.

¹²³ Anonymous, Woman's Faith: A Tale of Southern Life (New York: Derby & Jackson, 1856) 175.

¹²⁴ Charles ed Morris, The Great Republic by the Master Historians (New York: Pittsburgh [etc.] The R.S. Belcher Co., 1902) 15.

¹²⁵ Mims, Edwin. “Southern Poetry.” In Volume VII, J. A. C. Chandler, Franklin L. Riley, James Curtis Ballagh, John Bell Henneman, Edwin Mims, Thomas E. Watson, Samuel Chiles Mitchell, Walter L. Fleming, J. Walker McSpadden and Southern Historical Publication Society., The South in the Building of the Nation; a History of the Southern States Designed to Record the South's Part in the Making of the American Nation; to Portray the Character and Genius, to Chronicle the Achievements and Progress and to Illustrate the Life and Traditions of the Southern People (Richmond, Va.: The Southern historical publication society, 1909) 37.

¹²⁶ Francis Thornton’s *Return to Tradition* (with the starchy subtitle, “A Directive Anthology”), a Catholic anthology, prescribed the poet-priest as late as 1949.

¹²⁷ Oldemoppen, Abram J. Ryan: Priest, Patriot, Poet 50.

¹²⁸ Helen Dortch Longstreet was born the year of the battle of Gettysburg, and survived her husband—living until 1962(!)—leaving behind an apologetic biography that is one of the few sources to make mention of Longstreet's religious response to his institutional ouster. With friends like Ryan, Longstreet needed no enemies; the *Morning Star* early approved of the White League. Cf., Helen Dortch Longstreet, Lee and Longstreet at High Tide: Gettysburg in the Light of the Official Records (Gainesville, Ga.: The author, 1904) 118.

¹²⁹ He remained an extremely ambitious climber. Every year until he died, he passed Christmas Eve surrounded by his family, having them read aloud the scrapbook clippings that documented his attainments as a leading citizen. Ryan lived directly across the street from Taylor when he served St. Mary's, and the two became fast friends. Ryan introduced Taylor to his future wife. Lithe Leonora LeBaron was the very blossom of a sophisticated, well-to-do Catholic family. Taylor found himself more attracted to—Catholicism, and a changing heart prompted him to write one of his old Protestant tutors,

If you were to live where the [religious] forces were equally balanced, and could see the practical workings of good in both [Catholic and Protestant] systems...mingle with the priesthoods of both divisions, and read Catholic literature in an equal proportion—you could say to yourself, "I have been misled as the real nature of the [Catholic] church." The accounts of it in Protestant literature are neither fair nor true. Tennant S. McWilliams, Hannis Taylor : The New Southerner as an American (University: University of Alabama Press, 1978) 10.

¹³⁰ James, "Father Ryan," 492.

¹³¹ Cf., Sister Donallan's scrapbooks at Belmont Abbey.

¹³² Charles C. Boldrick, "Father Abram J. Ryan, the Poet-Priest of the Confederacy," The Filson Club Historical Quarterly 46.3 (1972): 211.

¹³³ The poll is cited on p. 153 of *The Catholic Church in Tennessee*, but no source is given. It is possible that the author confused it with *The Republican Banner*, a major Tennessee newspaper for many years. Only Princeton's library has the full print run of the *Banner* now.

¹³⁴ Walter M. Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2000) 7.

¹³⁵ Editorial comment indicates that the *Banner* aspired to a circulation of 20,000, an ambitious benchmark for a southern weekly that would indeed place it in a substantial national market. As with many penny press newspapers at the time, it was literally subscribed—underwritten—by patrons, some of whom it collected from by publishing their in-arrears accounts, a strategy thankfully obsolete today. To the North, the steam-powered

circular press churned out the daily edition. 77,000 copies of Bennett's *New York Herald* were snapped up on the eve of the Civil War, and the paper could boast the largest daily circulation in the world (although the weekly *New York Tribune* pushed about 200,000).

¹³⁶ Michael Kenny, "Father Ryan's Poems," America (1928): 238.

¹³⁷ "Their Story Runneth Thus" and "A Land Without Ruins."

¹³⁸ In *Roads to Rome*, Jenny Franchot suggests that this was the kind of gender role-challenging image that made Protestant Americans uneasy. Jenny Franchot, Roads to Rome : The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

¹³⁹ Gleeson, The Irish in the South, 1815-1877 1.

CHAPTER III

The Irish Writer Who Wasn't: Joel Chandler Harris and the Southern Identity Complex

The Catholics of Augusta are a chosen tribe, and "Irish" at that, as the Faithful are often designated in Georgia, whatever their racial origin.—Michael Kenny, S.J., in *America* Catholic magazine, December 15, 1928

We must not forget that real literary art is absolutely impartial and invariably just. None other can endure.—Joel Chandler Harris, writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, February 20, 1881.



Illustration 23. Joel Chandler during his *Remus Home Magazine* days.

* * *

There is a curious old derogatory descriptor in the South that falls somewhere in a class with "dirty egg-sucking dog." I have in mind "redheaded bastard," and it is likely that

Joel Chandler Harris heard the taunt hurled at him more than once during his childhood. He might also have heard its colorful, if violent corollary, expressed in the phrase, “[to] beat like a redheaded stepchild,” perhaps one notch above being “beaten like a rented mule.”¹

Something about the jibe “copperhead” denotes inferiority and on some innate level, bastardy. The connotation, I suspect, has diminished with time, although it may still be the stuff of schoolyard teasing. Indeed, this is so much in the air that for the older generation, no explanation is required. In the same way that tan skin is an enduring signifier for racial otherness, red hair was a mark of Irishness, and, in same degree, non-southernness. Likewise, to say that Joel Chandler Harris’s father was “an Irish day-laborer”—as his authorized biographer stated it—meant that he issued from the lowest levels of the social strata. The stigma has lifted somewhat as the Irish have come to be viewed as fully “white” in the American racial hierarchy.

This is a study of the southern Irish writers, so it will no doubt seem a little startling to begin by submitting that Joel Chandler Harris was probably not of Irish stock, although he verily died a Catholic. Rather, Joe Harris, as he was known, was branded Irish. Harris’s Irishness was widely accepted, although his own family were nonplussed about this strange theory and seemed at a loss to provide reliable genealogical information. The fact that so many of his homefolks would accept the notion is itself revealing. It is not difficult to imagine Harris’s modern analog, for Atlanta, not so long ago Marthasville, even then had a southern core, and outside of it, space for the lately-arrived and those who did not fit in it. Harris puttered happily around his suburban duchy, raising a perennial weed-eaten garden to keep in touch with his “cornfield journalist” roots, agreeably oblivious to neighborhood covenants, and elusive to the perfunctory efforts of neighbors to involve him in the usual

small pleasantries of suburban life. Harris had the friendliness, but not the world-wise charisma or politesse, to make himself a leading citizen outside of his columns. His wife moved in the community, and apparently insulated him from it; he was happy to let it move around him, and to accept a reversal of Victorian norms by letting her wear the public face.

Harris's distance from the southern center was in some respects liberating. It afforded him an unconventionality that extended as far as undermining the Lost Cause edifice in his writing, and it also freed him to marry a Catholic woman in the first place. Catholicity defined the outer boundary of his social aspiration. Atlanta was home to a small and vivacious Catholic community with its own norms of respectability; Margaret Mitchell was of them, and she drew on their lore when she wrote *Gone with the Wind*. Harris was an irregular churchgoer, and he effectively surrendered his full participation in the community at large when he converted. The decision was his last act of apostasy, where the extra-severe standards of southern conformity were concerned. The move effectively precluded him from the centers of Protestant influence so important to southern towns. It becomes easier to see how the community would accept the Irish story so readily.

Harris did not, however, wear the scarlet "I" during his lifetime, and the question lingers: Where did his "Irishness" come from? Immediately, a number of theories suggest themselves. The first possibility, which happens to be the most obvious and least likely, is that Joel Harris's father was indeed of Irish stock.

Heedful of the full import of Irish paternity for a southern boy, at least one historian has hazarded that there is something fishy going on here. Kenneth J. Thomas, Jr., whose column "Genealogy" has been a staple of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* for many years, investigated Harris's paternity extensively in the one keystone article to treat the subject.

Writing in 1986, he questioned whether Harris's birthyear was 1848 by convention or in fact. His skepticism was vindicated when the Turman-Harris Bible, once owned by Harris's grandmother Ann Mary Turman Harris, surfaced in 1997. That Bible is now a permanent part of the Harris collection at Emory University. It clarifies the family's official date of his birth (1845) rather than the 1848 persistently stated by biographers.

Thomas is also convinced that Harris's father was not an Irishman, and he has investigated Harris's paternity with painstaking care. "Is it possible," he asks, "that there is any truth in Fannie Lee Leverette's candidate [for J.C. Harris's father], the Irish day-laborer (or ditcher)? In her novel-like story, he was the easiest type of person to be forgotten, one who was not worthy of them. Since he was not a member of their community, no one would remember his name anyway." He wrote to me, "I do not feel the Irish attribution has any real merit," and added that the derogatory register of "Irish" was well understood.² Harris's immediate descendants, and indeed, his wife, were also in the dark about their progenitors.

The Harris family had chosen Julia Collier Harris (1875-1967), wife of Julian L. Harris (1874-1963), as Joe Harris's authorized biographer—a career-making move for Julia Harris, in fact, who refers to Harris in the book as "father," not "father-in-law." But when she realized at the outset that the family had no idea who his father was—as Essie Harris put it, "He never bothered himself with kinfolks"—she traveled to Georgia for interviews, and turned to Fannie Lee Leverette (1870/1-1956), a source trusted by the family. It was Leverette who first supplied the Irish connection.

The story was touched by blarney, or at least, an evolving sense of specificity, in the retelling. *Life and Letters* (1917) first repeated Settle's claim that Mary Ann Harris was enamored of an "Irishman, and from him the boy inherited his bright blue eyes and his sense

of humor.”³ Leverette’s account avers that he was a day laborer who worked nearby; Julia Harris only went as far as mentioning “a man inferior in education and station.” By 1932 “she changed him to be an Irishman (and Catholic by definition) who came to work on Joel’s grandfather’s plantation and who was served at a second table.”⁴ In the 1941 edition, at the hands of her amanuensis, Fannie Lee waxed specific about the unnamed Irishman’s trade: he was a “ditcher.” Writing to Lucien Harris in 1941, she identified the putative father as “‘Pat’ Barrett.” “Pat” is a cast-off Irish name, and might as well be a place-filler. It is as good as saying, “an unnamed Irishman.” Kenneth Thomas has identified a number of “shadow-families” that emerge from the woodwork; none of them have been positively linked to the Harrises yet.

As Thomas points out, though, Leverette’s knowledge of Harris’s parentage would have come from her deceased parent, and it cannot be reconciled with what is known of the Harris’s arrival in Eatonton. Either “Fannie Lee actually believed that her story was absolutely true, probably because it came through her mother from her great aunt, ... who had been dead for over twenty-five years, or she made it up.”⁵ Julia Harris came to have her own doubts about the reliability of her source, and expressed her concern to her publisher. Then, perhaps to cover her tracks, she removed the correspondence reflecting her uncertainty from the Emory archive for a period of years.

Faced with the choice between changing one’s mind and proving that there is no need to do so, almost everyone gets busy on the proof. Julia Harris enlarged on the story, revised it, and published Leverette’s comments as quotations, though they are full of paraphrasing and rearrangement. There is not a shred of evidence that the Irish rumor ever surfaced *before* Harris died, and it did not come from within the family, but from a family acquaintance eager

to assert her authority, who appears in an account by a biographer bent on writing *the* authoritative account. It is astonishing how durable Julia Harris's "Irish scoundrel" story has proven over the years, given that it was built on the thinnest of evidence.⁶

Suffice it to say that there are many ways of being Irish, and these are not of obvious and easy kind. Let us suppose that the Irishness is more the stuff of invention than fact. How, then, do we account for the popular ascription? The theories, severally treated, are as follows:

- 1) It is a point of semantic confusion: Georgians held the misconception that all Catholics were Irish, and so came to call the faithful "Irish." Harris stayed on friendly terms with the Catholic Church throughout his life. He married a Catholic, permitted his children a Catholic education, supported Church growth, and eventually converted. This "Irish" behavior was eventually taken literally.
- 2) Harris's biographers felt compelled to classify him by race, according to the predilections of the early twentieth century. No single ancestry cornered the market on poor whites, but Irish, it was understood, were best fitted to James Henry Hammond's "mudsill" (Hammond's term for the inevitable drudge class, which, in the South, denoted African Americans). In this sense, "Irish" is more a class signifier than a racial one. Moreover, Irish was a plausible choice for a runaway father, and Harris's "unsouthern" ways freed others to associate him with the lowly Irish.
- 3) The shadow of racial admixture hung over the bastard boy. Under this view, Anglo-Saxons did not mingle; the Irish did. "Irish," in this sense, was applied to anyone of impure racial origin who was not "part black," and perhaps some who

were. This latter theory is unlikely, and equally unproveable, since the authentic parentage of Joel Chandler Harris remains obscure. It nevertheless befits Harris's low social status.

The first theory can be dispensed with easily. The head quotation, from a priest who suggests that Catholics in Georgia were called "Irish," points to a misconception that could have given rise to the Irish rumor. Kenny continued, "The diocesan catechism, published by Bishop Verot in the [eighteen]'sixties, propounded the question, 'Are the Irish the only members of the Catholic Church?' and returned the evidently unconvincing answer, 'No, the Irish form but a small part,' etc. Augusta's Catholics are still militantly 'Irish,' and, though but a fraction of the population, have exercised a dominant influence..."⁷ Only one copy of the text Kenny refers to remains in a public library.⁸ He is paraphrasing, but there is just such a point settled in the catechism. Augustin Verot, a Frenchman, disputes the popular myth sternly: "It is gross ignorance that makes some call our religion the Irish church. The Irish are a very small portion of the Catholic church."⁹ Catholics in Georgia were the subject of much misunderstanding, suspicion, and occasionally, outright hostility, and it is revealing that Verot felt called upon to set the record straight so long ago. If Southerners were susceptible to the belief that all Irish were Catholic, they might have well believe the converse. Hence it is conceivable that Harris's Catholicism introduced the Irish confusion, but this is simply unknowable.

So I will go to this last point first. One can profitably unravel the chimerical meaning of "Irish," and its application to a poor boy named Joe Harris, to appreciate the extent of Irish outsiderism in the South. In Harris's time, "Irish" was, without question, a racial place-marker. Early Irish immigrants were deigned "niggers turned inside out," and "the Negroes,

for their part, were sometimes called ‘smoked Irish,’ an appellation they must have found no more flattering than it was intended to be.”¹⁰ This proximity within a socially undesirable racial caste engendered a good deal of hostility, and it appears to have made its way South. *Out of the Ditch* (1910), a latter-day slave narrative, relates the tale of an overseer, one “Jimmie Welch,” who “was born in Ireland” and “no mean orator.” “It was no fault of his that he was born an Irishman, but very inconvenient. He had many peculiar characteristics, and the Negroes who have a saying that ‘An Irishman is only a Negro turned inside out’ disliked him almost to the extent of hatred.”¹¹ The old saw, that “to be born with even one drop of Irish blood is to be cursed,” could be turned on its head and viewed as a permutation of the infamous One Drop rule, which classified anyone of black parentage, however dilute, as *ipso facto* black.

The ubiquity of the Irish stigma can be illustrated by a cursory examination of the strange career of “Irish” in racial taxonomy. When the first Congress voted in 1790 that only “white” persons could be naturalized, it did not settle the status of Irish, “since it was by no means obvious who was ‘white.’” This became more of an issue as Irish arrived who were not merely indentured, serving the Crown, or in captivity—they were free men, but would they be counted white? At first, the answer returned was a resounding “no”; for one thing, penal laws in the original colonies precluded their full social participation. Indeed, from earliest times in America, Irish carried a connotation of “non-white.” Hence the unlikely terms, “Black Irish” and “dark Irish,” two generic signifiers that are still misapplied. Ultimately, they are thinly-veiled euphemisms for racial admixture, applied particularly to mixed-blood Native Americans.

In the South, it has been observed, mixed blood and morally tainted blood have often been confused. One is soon plunged into the strange waters of American racial mysticism; folklore and history soon become indistinguishable in this lost continent of American race-fixing. The terms probably arose in the latter part of the nineteenth century, and persist well until the present, especially in the case of what is sometimes referred to as the “little races” of the South: the Rawbones, the Brass Ankles, the Melungeons, and so on. The *Cherokee Phoenix*, the pre-eminent and so-called ethnic newspaper, broadcast the missionary Daniel S. Butrick’s view that the Melungeons were a “lost tribe of Israel,” and curiously, the same nonsense has been said to account for the mysterious origins of the Irish people. More than likely, the mystery races of the South were simply tri-racial peoples who lived beyond the pale, in the main, intermarrying communities of cast-off whites, Native Americans, and African Americans.¹² Reputationally, the Irish were considered most likely to mix with darker races. There is some historical basis for that assumption, although, as Noel Ignatiev argues, Irish Americans veered sharply from “admixture” in their increasingly clamorous pursuit of white status. We need not enter that debate now; I would submit that the confusion over Irish status manifested itself in the odd entanglements of racial classification.

It is a considerable irony that some Americans reached *up* for Irishness. In a nation obsessed with Linnaean schemes of racial classification, “Black Irish” was a category of last retreat, particularly for Native Americans who had good reason to fear removal if they declared themselves candidly. Some Native Americans still describe themselves unselfconsciously as “Black Irish,” because that is what they have always been told they are. Likewise, “Black Dutch,” and in earlier times, “Portuguese,” “French,” “Spanish,” and “Italian”—Melungeons often called themselves “Portygee,” which is probably based more on

another category of convenience than historical fact. The point is that if one could not prove whiteness, one could retreat to an unproven, and unproveable, category. And “Irish” made thin claims to whiteness at best.

Attempting to seize this racial bugaboo is like grasping at water. Animated but barren debates continue to swirl around them. “Dark Irish” has a different register again in American folklore, where, particularly in the twentieth century, it has accumulated new (and artificial) meanings, principally to distinguish the dark-haired Irish from their blond and redheaded counterparts. A number of equally imponderable theories attach: that the dark Irish were descended from shipwrecked survivors of the Spanish Armada (extremely unlikely), that they sprang from Irish/Italian stock during the Roman empire (lost to the mists of time), that they comprised the aboriginal Irish who predated the Gaels and Normans (conventionally described as dark and swarthy) and thus are found primarily on the western fringe of the auld sod, and so on.

There is an attendant misconception, long since grown ossified, that red hair denotes Irishness, despite the prevalence of redheads in other parts of the world; it surfaces when David O’Connell refers to “the Norman-Irish racial trait of red hair” in *The Irish Roots of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone With the Wind* (1996).¹³ In fact, if the current science is to be credited, there is simply no meaningful genetic distinction as between the Scots, the English, and the Irish. Indeed, in their myths of origin and historical traffic, the Scots and Irish explicitly recognize common ancestry: the Irish still regard Scotland as their ancestral homeland; Scots Gallic and the Irish language are essentially the same tongue. Which is not to throw them in the same cultural pot. The panethnic “Celtic thesis”—notably set forth in Grady McWhiney’s *Cracker Culture: Celtic Ways in the Old South*—has been largely

discarded in the growing consensus that the details are what matters, and if one seeks to understand various Celtic peoples, one must first apprehend their distinctness.¹⁴ The dividing line, in racial terms, is arbitrary; the cultural markers are more easily pronounced. Nevertheless, McWhiney's study opened the way for discourse on southern ethnicities.

So it is significant that Harris's biographers have repeatedly foregrounded the *painful* immutability of his red hair as confirmation of his Irish patrimony. "He had flaming-red Irish hair and a slight frame that could well have made him the object of schoolyard ridicule," writes Bertram Wyatt-Brown in *Hearts of Darkness*.¹⁵ Paul M. Cousins, who authored the first scholarly Harris biography, references his "diminutive size and his pronounced red hair and freckled face," that "set him apart from the others."¹⁶ As a cub reporter in Savannah, he carried the baggage: "he had become highly sensitive about his awkwardness when he was among girls and women, and particularly so on account of the numerous references in the Georgia press to his personal appearance, especially to his red hair..." Lucinda MacKethan identifies his red hair as a source of "lifelong embarrassment."¹⁷

It is not hard to see why. In the summer of 1878 someone penned a mock-epic on the subject of Joe Harris's red hair. The squib, written in red ink, related an instance where the fire department had to be summoned to put out the "flaming" hair. The butt of the joke charitably offered to serve as a lamppost to aid drunken men, or as a lighthouse. The staff at the *Macon Telegraph* dubbed him "Pink Top from Old Put"; his dispatches were elsewhere described as "Hot shots from Red Hair-is," "Harris Sparks," and "Red-Top Flashes." The teasing went on for a full decade. Bruce Bickley, Harris's outstanding biographer, mentions a theory that Harris habitually wore a hat indoors as a defense.

Walter Hines Page, who had urged Harris to publish his second novel, *Sister Jane* (1896), sketched Harris's literary persona (Joe Harris) as distinct from his personage (Mr. Joel Chandler Harris)—quite appropriately, since Harris himself only half-jokingly referred to his writing persona as the “other fellow,” a bifurcation widely commented upon. (The “other fellow” was a habit of Harris's speech, as evidenced in a letter to his daughter: “No doubt Sister Sacred Heart is of the opinion that I have forgotten my promises, but it was the other fellow who did the forgetting”—the cheque was in the mail). Page described Harris's ordinary incarnation: “a little man...with red, unkempt hair, a fiery half-vicious mustache, a freckled face and freckled hands; and there is nothing striking about him...”¹⁸ And a co-worker from the *Monroe Advertiser* remarked that the copy-boy was “one of the reddest-headed, freckle-faced boys I had ever seen. The freckles were as large as the proverbial turkey egg, and the hair was a fiery red.”¹⁹

Mary Ann Harris purportedly gave her daughter-in-law what may be the simplest explanation for Harris's red hair: she had been a “ginger” in her childhood. But according to Walter Brasch, Harris's most recent biographer, Harris

...considered his red hair, more identified with Irish than American Southerners, as a mark of shame; others compounded his alienation by calling him a ‘red-headed bastard.’ As an adult, he was still shy, still sensitive about his red hair...and usually wore a felt hat in public, even indoors. Even when his hair and mustache turned from red to a sandy blond, he still believed they were ‘fiery red.’

Indeed, on one of Fannie Lee Leverette's visits to Harris's ample “Wren's Nest” estate, the writer took her for a stranger knocking on his door, and promptly tried to slip away through the back. “Hey there! Come on back, I see you,” she called to him. When he recognized her, he replied, to wit: “Hey, yourself! Come on in, take off your hat, and stay with us. I thought you were one of those red-headed female magazine writers come around

to write up my red head again.”²⁰ The encounter took place just before Harris went on permanent bedrest.

The accounts are substantiated by autobiographical elements in Harris’s fiction. In *Gabriel Tolliver* (1902), Harris returned to the semi-autobiographical terrain of *Sister Jane*, admitting that he inserted himself “in the most unreserved way.”²¹ He sketches himself as a child character named “Cephas,” which was Essie Harris’s pet name for him. The boy is “freckled” and—Harris tips his hand here, confirming longstanding rumors about his misstated age—“appeared to be about ten years old; he was really nearly fourteen. Cephas was so ugly that he was ugly when he laughed....” Moreover, he was an “ill-favoured little creatur[e]” who never forgot a favor, “his mother’s only child, and he had learned at a very early age just how to manage her.” Later, in a characteristic slip of voice, Cephas/Harris admits that “he has bitterly regretted, oh, tens of thousands of times, that, instead of standing aloof from his mother’s feelings, he did not throw his arms around her.” Our Cephas, “a small boy with a tender heart,” is given to practical jokes and “dog-latin” doggerel, and when he chances to receive a kiss from a pretty lady on his “freckled face,” it is left “very red after the operation.”²²

Whence the preoccupation? Carrottops’ visible differences have always been the stuff of schoolyard drubbing, but ribbing seems to have unnerved Harris to an extraordinary degree. Some of it surely owed to a deep reticence. He felt reasonably safe behind the editorial broadside, where he might take on the personas he was too shy to realize in the flesh. Harris was one of those who remarked every social convention, saw them in correct light as arbitrary, and yet was incapable of participating in them. Mark Twain finally goaded him into joining a short-lived lecture circuit (Harris had turned down Thomas Nelson Page’s

similar offer), but when he went to New Orleans and joined his friends Clemens and George Washington Cable—both polished platform speakers—it ended calamitously. A restive crowd of children gathered at Cable's house to meet the man behind Remus, and were dismayed to find that Uncle Remus was in fact a white man. The children's protests excruciated Harris, who always sought the good favor of young ones. The crestfallen writer was confronted with a sharp reminder of his outsiderism—which he had orchestrated, after all, by writing in a black voice.

Uncle Remus ensured that Harris would remain an outsider. The character's popularity typecast his creator, and as some critics have observed, Harris *was* Remus. But Harris could not be Remus and be taken seriously. In person, Harris simply could not pass himself off as a captivating, assured yarnspinner. In Twain's account, "it turned out that he had never read aloud to people, and was too shy to venture the attempt now. Mr. Cable and I read from books of ours, to show him what an easy trick it was; but his immortal shyness was proof against even this sagacious strategy; so we had to read about Brer Rabbit ourselves." Harris cut the tour short and went back to Wren's Nest—so named for a pair of wrens that had nested in the mailbox, an eyesore that Pink Top, a bird lover, had refused to remedy.

Harris took any kidding to heart. Brasch was led to reckon that "Harris believed he was ugly and unloved, a cast-off not only because of his 'bastard' status but because he was the son of an Irish immigrant. During the mid-nineteenth century, the Irish were treated poorly by Americans of all regions, some because they were of the lower classes." But he was clearly unaware that Harris probably never thought of himself as Irish during his lifetime.

This brings me to the second major theory that would explain how came Harris to be called Irish: his southern outsiderism. The extent of Harris's non-southernness can be gauged in three different areas. He kept company with a circle of southern writers who had become disaffected with the region. He ventilated his views, mutinous and indeed odious to party-line white southerners, in both fiction and nonfiction. And his Catholic sympathies ran deep.

A measure of his non-southernness is reflected in the short-lived book tour. Harris kept fit, if opinionated, company on that circuit as he traveled with George Washington Cable and Mark Twain, completing a coterie of writers who were also "failed" southerners. At times, the three seemed to borrow from a shared repertoire. Their tour marks a remarkable meeting of extraordinary minds in its own right, and the parallelism of their lives and works serves to reveal that Harris participated in the intellectual debates of the leading literati and occasionally shared their sense of exclusion. Cable, for one, knew well the exactions of southern conformity. In mid-career as a man of letters, he moved from fairly innocuous local color to full-fledged social criticism, in essay and speech. The more embattled he felt himself, the more severe his repudiation of southern ways, spurred perhaps by, some have suggested, a dour Presbyterian sensibility in freewheeling, meridional Louisiana. (It may have been this tendency that led Cable to break off with Lafcadio Hearn, who freely owned his dalliances in brothels). But Cable was no prig, as Edmund Wilson points out, and he mitigated his fundamentalism over time. Somewhere in the man was an indwelling sense that he did not belong. Perhaps he felt excluded from the venerable Catholic ruling class that held sway in Louisiana. Regardless, his fall from southern grace marked a fairly severe transformation, especially considering that Cable had served as a

Confederate cavalryman, a sworn enemy of Butler and his occupying troops, and, at first, a supporter of the slavery status quo.

It bears underscoring that the friendship between Harris and Cable flourished because they were politically in agreement. In the paranoid wake of Reconstruction, when white southerners sought constant reassurances of party-line loyalty, Harris compromised; the uncompromising Cable lived on borrowed time. His descent was aggravated by the way his work was misrepresented, coupled with his drive to represent accurately the social conditions of the South. The two processes fueled each other. A persistent accusation brought against Cable was that he implied rampant race-mixing among Creoles.²³

Harris had won southern hearts if not minds with his Uncle Remus sop. And to the degree that the Lost Cause atmosphere lionized Abram Ryan, it ostracized Cable (and privately conflicted Harris). Yet Harris and Cable were walking the same thematic ground. Cable developed a literary corpus that moved away from the harmless *Swallow Barn* sketches for which southern readers showed such appetite. In *The Grandissimes* (1880), Cable's surrogate-character, Frowenfeld, serves as an interested northern observer in New Orleans, supplying a convenient mouthpiece for criticizing slavery and southern provincialism—the kind of device that Harris often employed. *Madame Delphine* classically follows a star-crossed octoroon cursed by her “one drop,” a theme that Harris picked up in his own work, as I will demonstrate later. A story with a black hero who was brutally cut down for being “uppity” was regarded as unprintable for its “unmitigatedly distressful effect”; Harris, too, wrote black characters who were held in contempt for demanding a modicum of respect. Cable also took on prison reform and another pet concern, the South's educational system—two of Harris's favorite editorial hobby horses, too.

But Cable dared to tread where Harris would not. By 1885, he raised the polemical ante to its limit, suggesting that full equality and integration should be attainable by southern blacks, even if it required federal intervention. Whereupon even Harris's brother-in-feeling Henry Grady parted company, rejoining, "The south will never adopt Mr. Cable's suggestion of the social intermingling of the races." This was not all what Cable suggested, because he was enough of a realist to know that such a fond hope would be a long time coming, but his detractors did not seem to notice. In a resounding rejection of the idea, Grady noted that the southern people had accepted emancipation and enfranchisement, but once these were accomplished, "nothing more was possible. 'Thus far and no further,' she [the South] said to her neighbors, in no spirit of defiance, but with quiet determination."²⁴

White southerners, then as now, valued quietude. Cable prodded the "fierce and resentful conservatism" of his section, behind which "there was a progressive though silent South which needed to be urged to speak and act." His call to conscience, repeated nearly verbatim by Harris in his own editorials, was unavailing. A defeated people could not be expected to receive such a critique very graciously, and in the ensuing recrimination, there was little hope for a *détente*. Cable made other blunders, too; the southern press circulated a statement he made in Boston, saying that he felt he had never been at home until he visited New England. Still more damning, though no less remarkable a human achievement for the humility and tractability of opinion it represents, the former confederate called the cause of the Union "just" in *Dr. Sevier*: "Lo, now, since nigh twenty-five years have passed, we of the South can say it!"

But few were ready to raise their voices. Cable was deemed "untouchable" by Arlin Turner after the Louisiana writer stooped to dine with the "colored elite" of Nashville.

“Untouchable” was the *mot juste*; the writer tumbled further in the southern racial caste system. He had set out to prosecute a well-intentioned mission, hoping to help establish an Open Letter Club, a liberal, colorblind society that would promote racial and sectional comity. Instead, the Vanderbilt professor who was to serve as his contact promised violence if he showed himself again. Grace King summed up the common perception: “He was a native of New Orleans and had been well treated by its people, and yet he stabbed the city in the back, as we felt, in a dastardly way, to please the Northern press.”²⁵ In a treatment of southern intolerance that made it clear he felt himself gagged, Joel Chandler Harris raised the specter of Cable’s scapegoating: “Those who would understand what I mean would do well to recall the hot criticism and social ostracism occasioned by George W. Cable’s extraordinary studies of Creole life in New Orleans. Mr. Cable was as sensitive in regards to his art as his critics were with respect to the life he depicted, and he straightaway betook himself to alien skies, bag and baggage.”²⁶

Cable decamped for the North, smarting and feeling under duress. Having run afoul of Cash’s savage ideal, he found himself permanently shut out, a wounded Confederate veteran left to spend his days in New England. Adumbrating a later generation of writers, he counted himself a southern exile, a designation in which he could take a certain dignified solace, but that was also distressful. He still “belonged peculiarly to the South,” but, he grouched, somewhat fairly, the South could no longer be considered “a free country.”²⁷

Neither did Harris consider the South a “free country” in that sense. He had Cable as a caution. As a southerner living with his family in the South, Harris walked a fine line. If his views were too strongly oppositional, it would not be going too far to say that he risked grievous bodily injury. He did not exaggerate when he observed that William Makepeace

Thackeray “took liberties with the people of his own blood and time that would have led him hurriedly in the direction of bodily discomfort if he had lived in the South.” The pity of it is that some of Harris’s critique was quashed by the savage ideal. In the same essay, he acknowledged the chilling political climate, such that the southern writer was not permitted to “draw an impartial picture of Southern civilization, its lights and shadows.”²⁸ This was one cause that Harris never relaxed. Late in life, he expressed the same worry: “It seems that there are things we cannot deal with familiarly—things that we cannot touch without our fingertips drawing a blood-blister on the unseemly forehead of politics; and when our writers take their pen in hand, and begin to set forth in fiction the things with which they are familiar, they unconsciously feel that they are under some sort of pledge not to offend the abnormal sensitiveness of their neighbors—that they are bound to glass over certain conditions and circumstances that are a very definite part of their surroundings.”²⁹

Harris considered himself perilously close to ostracism, and Cable may have seen little to laugh about in his southern blacklisting, but neither man had Samuel Clemens’ swagger. Twain *invited* southern opprobrium. He took surpassing pleasure in describing himself as a “de-Southernised Southerner.” He pilloried the chivalric pretensions of southern society and laid blame for the war squarely on Sir Walter Scott’s novels, advancing the “wild” proposition that they helped catalyze a deluded people, a claim that historians are now wont to take seriously. Twain blasted the “Sir Walter Scott Middle Age sham civilization,” all the while recognizing that southerners actually *believed* in Scott’s chivalric, honor-based orders—much to their detriment.

Canonically speaking, the Connecticut Yankee has proven irresistible to scholars, who have, at last, accomplished what the unwilling southerner vehemently denied. Literary

scholars have hooked Twain into the southern canon by way of the quintessentially “southern” Mississippi River, his southern lineage (his father was from Virginia), his folksy manner, his southwestern humor, and his culturally southern politics.

Like his friends Harris and Cable, Twain’s southernness could be called into question, depending on who was making the argument. Kindred spirits, one might conclude of Twain’s lasting friendship with Joel Chandler Harris, on these facts alone. One additional consideration does not quite fit, though. Harris’s life traces his gravitation toward Catholicism, whereas Twain had a stormy relationship with Catholicism throughout his life—it little agreed with his dim view of authority and his essentialist notions of American freedom. Indeed, he saw Cable’s buttoned-down religiosity as the great limiter of his intellect. He wrote to Howells, “You will never, never know...how loathsome a thing the Christian religion can be made until you come to know and study Cable daily and hourly...He has taught me to abhor and detest the Sabbath-day and hunt up new and troublesome ways to dishonor it.” As a youth, he had seen enough of zealotry: specimens of cheerless Catholic piety and of the stultifying frontier-variety Protestant awakenings surrounded him. Hannibal was a steamboat ride away from Saint Louis, where old French and German Catholic orders increasingly resented the famine era influx of Irish immigrants.³⁰ Saint Louis and New Orleans comprised the termini of a Catholic circuit so well established that it inspired perennial conspiracy theories of papist takeover schemes.

How that proximity inspired Twain’s animus is unclear, but what is certain is that Twain attacked Catholicism relentlessly. *The Innocents Abroad*, *A Tramp Abroad*, and *The Mysterious Stranger* all took aim at mother church. He ribbed Romanism and disparaged Catholic contributions to Western civilization (along with everyone else’s) in *A Connecticut*

Yankee in King Arthur's Court, leading a *Catholic World* reviewer to remonstrate, "He has all the irreverence of the worshipper of the almighty dollar, and all the bitterness and hatred of the church which led the Puritans into those savage attacks on art, music, and the requirements of civilization which the church founded and fostered." Twain certainly did not limit himself to needling only Catholics; he twits Baptists, too, in *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*.

Perhaps he protested too much. The Irish Catholics who filed in on wagon train to Saint Louis, or disembarked from the Mississippi, or debouched for the frontier, were kissing cousins to the resourceful Protestant Irish who settled the region by way of Kentucky and points South. Twain was one of these, and his Scots-Irish roots (his grandmother was a Casey) undeniably complicate his relationship with Catholicism, and, for that matter, with Irishness. Literary historian Shelley Fisher Fishkin claims that a ten-year-old African American boy may have served as an analog for Huckleberry Finn and inspired Huck's black speech patterns, prompting her to ask, was Huck black? (Her answer is a peremptory yes). Noel Ignatiev takes it one step further, and asks, was Huck Irish?

Militating in favor of Huck's Irishness, Ignatiev cites the fact that Huck is a runaway, bears an Irish surname (which happens to be the same as the leading figure in Irish mythology, I would add), and was fathered by the town drunk. Here his case grows less forceful. "On the journey they have adventures and swap tales. From Jim he learns about omens and charms. It is a very 'Irish' story."³¹ But it is not entirely clear in what respects, and this is left to the reader's imagination. Ignatiev also presses the point that Twain saw Huck as Irish, citing Twain's feedback to a publisher. "I returned the book-back [book cover]. All right and good, and will answer, although the boy's mouth is a trifle more Irishy

than necessary.” The statement is rather ambiguous: was Twain defending Huck from caricature? Or from charges of being Irish? Had he instructed the illustrator to produce an Irish-looking Huck? And just what is an Irishy mouth? If ever an American writer had one, it was Twain. Regardless, Joel Chandler Harris flew to his friend’s defense.

I know that some of the professional critics will not agree with me, but there is not in our fictive literature a more wholesome book than *Huckleberry Finn*. It is history, it is romance, it is life. Here we behold human character stripped of all its tiresome details; we see people growing and living; we laugh at their humor, share their griefs; and, in the midst of it all, behold we are taught the lessons of honesty, justice and mercy.³²

If Twain aspired to full Anglo-Saxon whiteness, and all the rights and privileges appertaining thereunto, what did he make of his Irishy friend Joel Chandler Harris? And what did he think of Harris’s interest in a faith often regarded as epitomizing the intellectual bugbear of blind, servile, even heathenish, belief? Twain may have nurtured a quiet fascination with the Catholic Church, even though it repulsed him. He spent years in the laborious researches required for *Personal Recollections of Joan of Arc* (1896), which he published serially in *Harper’s* to prevent typesetting. It was one of his last works, and he considered it one of his most important, notwithstanding the fact that nearly every critic panned it. Twain’s admiration of Joan was unqualified. It was as if he had chosen only one figure worthy of uncritical admiration. Something about Joan spurred Twain to limber the praise he had spared so many others. In the preface he notes that most renowned people must meet the moral measure of their day. “But the character of Joan of Arc is unique. It can be measured by the standards of all times without misgiving or apprehension as to the result. Judged by any of them, it is still flawless, it is still ideally perfect; it still occupies the loftiest place possible to human attainment, a loftier one than has been reached by any other mere mortal.” Perhaps that was because he could appreciate Joan as a stand-alone maverick, a

paradoxically iconoclastic heroine with a kind of Protestant ethic. Twain's final manuscript, the nihilistic, heavily-revised and frequently bizarre *Mysterious Stranger*, is set in Austria during the Middle Ages, and is peopled by dutiful Catholics and religious, both good and bad. Shape-shifting Satan incarnate (a.k.a, "Number 44, New Series 864,962") plays a major role in the story; God does not, and the chapters unfold satanic machinations within the Catholic Church, as well as resistance to them. As the mysterious stranger who creates and destroys at a whim, and who bears a message of the meaninglessness of life ("You are but a *Thought*—a vagrant Thought, a useless Thought, a homeless Thought, wandering forlorn among the empty eternities"), Twain's Satan loves animals and laughter and contrives "the most elaborate projects and...then...would suddenly drop them." He appears a good match for Cormac McCarthy's reptilian Judge of *Blood Meridian* renown. Yet relatively little critical attention has been paid to Twain's *Joan* and *Mysterious Stranger* manuscripts, and there is a book yet to be written about the Catholic foil in Twain's life and writing.

Twain's work shows him in dialogue with Catholicism to a surprising degree. Still, Twain and Harris plainly held divergent views of the Church, and Harris may well have muted his sympathies around his irascible friend. Along with Cable, they comprised a literary triumvirate, and they were all, after a fashion, *agents provocateurs*. But only Joe Harris could claim to have gotten away with it, for only Joel Chandler Harris remained at home in the South, despite his private doubts. He explicitly recognized the risks of taking a southern critique too far.

And Joe Harris knew that, no matter his achievement, he could not claim to be a fully pedigreed Southerner. He came of the poor-whites, notwithstanding the embrace of the middle and upper-class Atlantans in his west end neighborhood; his bastardy irrevocably

divested him of the pretenses of fatherly name-association. He had married a French Canadian, and even more damning, he was friendly to Catholicism, eventually following his interest to the baptismal font. He missed out on a conventional southern pathway to name-making and ducked Confederate service. He was of age, though he would have made a poor specimen of soldier. In garnishing Harris's name to the Confederate government, his employer, Joseph Addison Turner, the squire of Turnwold Plantation, noted "Weighs only about 100 pounds. Frail and feeble. Not fit for military service. Exempt under state and confederate law, as a compositor." The boy's age may have been constantly misstated to protect him from the draft. Regardless, a gentle soul missed his best chance for southern respectability.

He was conflicted to the very core about being a southerner in the first place. His critique, catholic in its completeness, spans the range of his fiction. Those who castigate Harris for walking the paternalistic racial line miss the point entirely, and throw out the more challenging portion of his work in the balance. The most obvious instances scarcely need enumeration: Harris's trickster characters invade southern sacred space and challenge the morality of the ruling class; his parables constantly transgress the standards of racial etiquette, including the erotic (viz., "The Moon in the Mill-Pond," where the triumphant Brer Rabbit and Brer Tarrypin "went home wid de gals"). Uncle avows with "unusual emphasis," "[E]f dese yer tales wuz des fun, fun, fun, en giggle, giggle, giggle, I let you know I'd a-done drapt um long ago." Faulkner's famous chiastic observation, that in the North they love the race and hate the man, finds confirmation in Aunt Minervy's reaction to the idea that Yankees "are sorry for the Negroes." "But I'll tell um all anywhar, any day, dat I'd lots druther dey'd be good ter me dan ter be sorry fer me."³³

The litany leveled against him is, by this time, familiar. It is true that Harris mishandled inflammatory themes from time to time, sometimes lapsed into bleary, rose-tinted paternalism, used racially insensitive language (although rarely insensitively), and even transmitted the odd off-color joke, particularly in his early reportage. It is also true that he remained a segregationist and sentimentalized the old plantation days. Thomas Nelson Page praised Harris, essentially, for getting race “right,” which comes as something of an indictment, given Page’s own reputation. (In fact, Page had more in common with New South reformers than has generally been appreciated). In short, Harris’s name has been hitched to the white establishment, and southern establishment views of black folk. James Weldon Johnson’s praise has long since been overridden by Sterling Brown’s critique, and many critics take a dim view of those who would rehabilitate Harris’s character. By analogy, Harris was to racial literature what Booker T. Washington was to civil rights (and, in point of fact, Harris did admire Washington, whose racial politics he considered *simpatico*). W.E.B. DuBois admired the “deft and singularly successful” storyteller, shared friends with him, and considered him an approachable ally. Reacting to the brutal lynching of Sam Hose, which the *Constitution* said “dethroned the reason of the people of western Georgia,” he set off, “smartly dressed, with his walking cane in hand,” to go the paper and “talk with Joel Chandler Harris, and try to put before the South what happened in cases of this sort, and try to see if I couldn’t start some sort of movement.” The meeting never happened, though, because DuBois learned en route that Hoses’s knuckles sat on macabre display as a ghastly relic, in a shop window nearby.³⁴ He called it off.

The incident shockingly illustrates, uppermost, the real consequences of political failure. Harris felt his position acutely, and one could easily misapprehend the wolf in

sheep's clothing. The instances where Harris canvassed protest themes are clearly more engaging than the moments when he seemed blithe, or unduly accommodationist, about race relations. Trudier Harris and William Andrews have held out Charles Chesnutt's *The Conjure Woman* (1899) as a luminous complement to Uncle Remus and an eligible corrective to Harris's more patronizing chapters.³⁵ Chesnutt is said to outshine Harris in freighting his superficially innocuous stories with subversive observations that point to the real horrors of material deprivation, southern violence, and racial apartheid. And there is no question that he braved some of the territory that Harris feared to tread. Those who expect that Harris's "whiteness" taints the tales at the fountainhead might turn to Chesnutt's work for an African American perspective on similar themes.

Chesnutt had some anxiety about standing in his predecessor's shadow. He published "Post-bellum—Pre-Harlem" (1931) to preserve his own distinctness. He stakes his individuality on the fact that Uncle Julius is "suggestive of Mr. Harris's *Uncle Remus*, but the tales are entirely different. They are sometimes referred to as folk tales, but while they employ much of the universal machinery of wonder stories, especially the metamorphosis, with one exception, that of the first story, *The Goophered Grapevine*, of which the norm was a folk tale, the stories are the fruit of my own imagination, in which respect they differ from the *Uncle Remus* stories which are avowedly folk tales."³⁶ And Chesnutt is right. Florence Baer undertook a systematic study of the Remus tales, and concluded that two-thirds of them indeed had African analogs, a respectable percentage considering that they were more than second-hand by the time that Harris got them.³⁷

Chesnutt's work is most often distinguished for providing a dissembling lackey who "wears the mask" in Julius, but the matter is not that simple. Bruce Bickley observes that

Harris cannot be taken at face value, either. "In claiming, almost in the same breath that Uncle Remus had 'nothing but pleasant memories' of slavery, and yet had an air of 'affectionate superiority' in his dealings with the little boy, Harris reveals his awareness of black role-playing and artful indirection around whites, as well as his own prejudice for the slavery era...."³⁸ Unsurprisingly, despite high marks from George W. Cable and Walter Hines Page, Chesnutt's edgier later books did not sell briskly, although they garnered uniformly favorable reviews from agents who labored under the misconception that he was a white man.

A small continent of criticism has accreted around the two writers, addressing the relationship between them, analyzing the degree to which Harris informed Chesnutt, scrutinizing who subverts whom, arguing for the superiority of one or the other, and hotly debating who has the greater authenticity. The pleasure of both volumes—and their several strengths—is accordingly diminished, and Harris is bound to come off the worse, because the objection that he projected white standards for black behavior is both unanswerable and inescapable. That is a pity, because it is hard to imagine a man more estranged from the South's savage ideal than Joel Chandler Harris. It is such a ticklish issue that critics still cannot agree whether *any* writer—and particularly one in the majority, writing in a minority voice—has the empathy and racial *gnosis* necessary to bring off, successfully, a radical change in point-of-view. Flannery O'Connor, kindred spirit, was no politically correct darling, and has been criticized on some of the same grounds (viz., off-color remarks in her correspondence), but she seems to have liked his style. On a Roman holiday she visited her dear friends, the Fitzgeralds, bearing a copy of the Uncle Remus stories with her for the

children. Finding that they spoke only Italian, she read it herself and reported, "It's really very fine."³⁹

Quoth the irascible Ignatius Reilly of *The Confederacy of Dunces*, "*O tempora! O mores!*" One wonders whether this issue can be arbitrated by the ages, or if the vicissitudes of identity politics will render it permanently insoluble. Fortunately, writers, as well as critics, will continue to write. African Americans have responded to the cooption through the fictional recapture of their lost patrimony. Some writers resent Harris for indelibly consigning a white name to black stories and "stealing" a heritage; these include Alice Walker, who was born, same as Harris, in Eatonton. The "Brer" tales catalyzed Zora Neale Hurston's interest in becoming a folklorist, as she explains in the introduction of *Mules and Men* (1935). Ralph Ellison reworked the tar baby motif in *Invisible Man* (1952), and makes metaphorical use of Brer Rabbit in *Shadow and Act* and *Going to the Territory*. Though it bears a singular title, Toni Morrison's *Tar Baby* (1981) offers four of the sticky figures. If Harris was "taking on," black writers have shown an interest in taking *back*.

Harris's influence on the symbolism of black writing in the twentieth century is well attested. But the wonder of it all is that white southerners might have gushed about the cheeky Remus stories in the first place, which, more often than not, parodied the very idea of "civilization" through insubordinate animal mimicry. Harris had enough sense of his otherness—bastard Irish, quixotically Catholic, southern society outsider—to venture the attempt. Chesnut left the south in pursuit of a literary vocation; Harris chose to remain. But Harris expressed himself as boldly as he dared and remained well within the moment of opinion-journalism. Certainly he was the intellectual disciple of his friend Henry Grady, who popularized the term "New South" and served as its leading prophet. The *Constitution*

devoted its energies primarily to alleviating the ill effects of sectionalism, and Grady attracted a staff that were as devoted to this banner as to the man.

Grady's *bete noir* was Tom Watson (1856-1922), the old-line founder of the Populist Party in Georgia, and a born demagogue. Watson's agrarian policies were the antithesis of New South idealism. Disenchanted small farmers formed the base of his constituency, and he rallied them into the breach as he decried Catholics, Jews, and Negroes with equal fervor. Some of his legacy was reflected in Atlanta's Klan-dominated city government of the 1920's.



Illustration 24. Tom Watson, demagogue.⁴⁰

Watson was quite a foil, in a way, the embodiment of everything that Harris was not. Like many reformers, Harris eventually settled into a talking-point rut; in this case, plumping for gradual New South reform (racial comity, the acceptance of industry, etc.) rather than getting lost in Lost Cause foolishness. He seemed to back away from some of these principles over time, and it is tempting to retroject a measure of blame. Indeed, some commentators have gone so far as to cite Harris's "backsliding" and "failure of nerve." The

settled wisdom is that Harris wearied of straddling the race line, leading him to soft pedal racial matters. It seems more persuasive that he simply lost steam, in part, because he wrote on controversial topics, and as a wayfarer in the provenance of black folklore, could satisfy neither race. Stung by the racist accusations of ethnologists, who construed the tales as proof of black primitivism, Harris threw up his arms. As in other facets of his life, authenticity mattered. He had prefaced *Nights With Uncle Remus* by averring, “none of the stories given in the present volume are ‘cooked.’”⁴¹ Still, the professors were grilling him. “All I know,” he once said, “is that every old plantation in the South is full of these stories. One thing is certain—the negroes did not get them from the whites; probably they are of remote African ancestry.”⁴² It was not until the 1970’s that scholars fully embraced this notion. Harris wrote when southern race relations approached a low point, and one might well ask whether it was very safe for a white man to write in a black voice, or, even more daringly, to hold out black folklore as a legitimate art form.

Harris was prescient in other respects. Long before Mencken lambasted the poor state of southern *belles lettres*, Harris opined, “the stuff we are in the habit of calling Southern literature is not only a burlesque upon true literary art, but a humiliation and a disgrace to the people whose culture it is supposed to represent.”⁴³ A few years later he professed, in summary, “the southern writer had to overcome his own sectional prejudices, addiction to romantic claptrap, and a degree of inhibiting self-consciousness.”⁴⁴ Writing as the frumpy but genial “Anne MacFarland” in *Uncle Remus’s Magazine*, he reiterated the point, somewhat incongruously slipping into his own voice:

It seem so easy for southern writers to have high ambition and adequate gifts of expression linked with an almost childish crudity of expression; our romantic tendencies threaten to run away with us, we are dreadfully sentimental on the slightest provocation, permitting our local

politics to run away with what should be art; and then, as your Mrs. Lundy Harris once said, we are handicapped by tradition, much of it make-believe tradition. What great writers we should have in the Southern States if only we could make our tradition and our environment contributory to our art!

The rhetoric sounds iconoclastic enough, but it needs qualification. Harris was very much a New Southerner in the mold of Grady, which is to say, he was a conservative progressive, and not necessarily a radical reformer. The New South was a new idea, but it was premised on good old fashioned southern conservatism, which is how someone like Grady could plank for change on the one hand, and uphold black disfranchisement (as in his speech to the Boston Merchants Association) and white supremacy (“The South and Her Problems”) on the other. After the fashion of his friend and mentor, Harris was a gradualist at best. “I am not a politician,” he stated flatly. “I am a Democrat on election day, but that is as far as I go.” In fairness, Harris avoided reflexive politics, and he was hardly a yellow dog Democrat, although he did take radical Republicans to task for enflaming black hostility for their political gain, and snipe the “partisan depravity of the Republican newspapers of the North” on occasion.⁴⁵ Howard Odum, Chapel Hill liberal *par excellence*, later pardoned Harris easily for editorializing that “outside influence has worked untold damage and hardship on the negro.” Odum’s politics resound in his estimation that “[Harris] longed for the people of his own state and section to conquer their sensitiveness to rational censure and to cultivate the tonic of habit of self-criticism, for he realized that until their intelligence reached this level no real progress was possible.”

Harris’s sense of critical distance almost certainly did not come from an Irish identity but was limbered by his bastardy and injured self-esteem, which told him that he was not a socially valuable person. He was armed with a sense of underdog justice. The shy journalist could be brazen in his journalistic alter-ego, and risked censure in tipping many a southern

sacred cow. Harris had no stomach for Lost Cause cant, and he sometimes used his editorial space to castigate the defenders of a stifling civic religion. He was not afraid to aim at icons. While he held up Lee as an example of honorable defeat, he blasted Davis for displaying “the temper of a disappointed politician. When he says that ‘the cause is not lost, only sleeping,’ he utters what every sensible southern man knows to be the veriest bosh.”⁴⁶ Indeed, Davis was “no longer the central figure and he no longer [had] the authority to represent anything save his own splenetic passions....” Elsewhere, he went against the grain in openly praising Lincoln, declaring him—alongside Stonewall Jackson (who investigated Catholicism in his early explorations of faith) and Father Damien (who served a leper colony)—one of his “favorite heroes in real life.”⁴⁷

And Harris broke with Grady on an important point by calling for the nullification of Jim Crow laws. He condemned vigilantism unequivocally as “a disgrace to this country,” and a “dangerous and demoralizing species of barbarism.” Although he would not go as far as countenancing miscegenation, he found bigotry inexcusable: “There is no reason why any Southern man, woman or child should have any prejudice against the negro race. There is no ground for it, no excuse for it.... The Southern editor who makes the discussion of [Reconstruction] an excuse for attacking and abusing the negroes grossly misrepresents his readers and the people of his section.”⁴⁸ (By contrast, Father Ryan had exploited the Reconstruction turmoil precisely to incite prejudice against African Americans.) Long before it became a fixture of academic debate, Harris tellingly observed of minstrelsy that its “exhibitions...are, like many other things in this life, an illusion.” The shows “represent nothing on the earth, except the abnormal development of a most extraordinary burlesque.”⁴⁹

III—Showing That "Night Riding" Leads to Dastardly Crimes, and Results From and Provokes "Pistol Toting", Which Is Already Too Prevalent in the South—The Psychology of "Pistol Toting"—The Killing of Carmack and Gonzales—Can We Expect the Uneducated and Uncultured Southern Man To Be Law-Abiding When Prominent Citizens Shoot One Another Down in City Streets?

Menace of the Mask

II—Clarksville: An Armed Camp in a Peaceful Republic Unparalleled Conditions in Tennessee

"Every unpunished murder takes away something from the scruple of every man's life." —Daniel Webster

By DON MARQUIS

CLARKSVILLE is in the southern part of Tennessee, on the Cumberland River, about miles from the Kentucky line, and the negroes do not like that a very large part of the colored story. But it is in the lower part of a strange interposition, and the question which is asked is so important that this:

What American population trouble into slavery, or into the spirit of the law?

There is a similar question here more sharply insisted in any community than in the people of Montgomery County, or Clarksville. It is the white race, the negro, and a community here, though more absolutely up to the mark, is not so much out of the way as it is. The great portion of Montgomery County, however, which stands for law and order, and which is not with the law, is not so much out of the way as it is. The great portion of Montgomery County, however, which stands for law and order, and which is not with the law, is not so much out of the way as it is.

The strange, strange, Clarksville for the first time in its own history, by the name of the situation in which it finds itself.

Here is a city of 12,000 people, in the midst of one of the most violent sections of a country, and which is not so much out of the way as it is. The great portion of Montgomery County, however, which stands for law and order, and which is not with the law, is not so much out of the way as it is.

Clarksville is a city of 12,000 people, in the midst of one of the most violent sections of a country, and which is not so much out of the way as it is. The great portion of Montgomery County, however, which stands for law and order, and which is not with the law, is not so much out of the way as it is.

political and literary line, the political and conditions which prevail are very similar. The growth of the Kentucky struggle and the events which led up to the fall of Harknessville, were told by Mr. J. Slaughter Carter in an article published in *Uncle Remus Magazine* for June 1908, and there have been many attempts to in the county, and to Clarksville since Mr. Carter's article was written, and the situation in Montgomery County is so dangerous of coming to the whole South that nothing looks as that region will be peaceful.

In spite of the fact that they had previously been known for the production of dark tobacco, the farmers found in the year 1908 and for several years afterwards that they were unable to get enough for their tobacco to pay them for

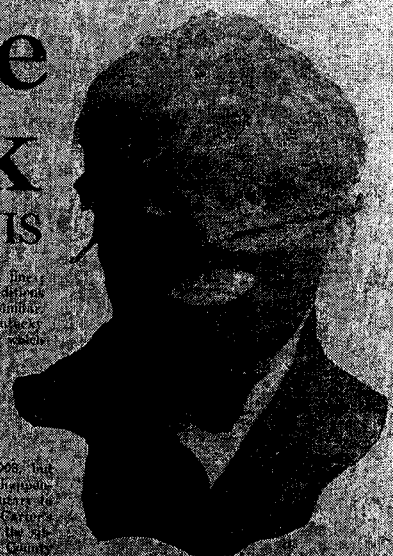


Illustration 25. Don Marquis's exposé from *Uncle Remus's Magazine*.

Harris could write with some pride in 1878 that there "never was a time when an editor with a purpose could accomplish more for his state and his country than just at present. What a legacy for one's conscience to know that one has been instrumental in mowing down the old prejudices that rattle in the wind like weeds." But Harris's stories were, in some ways, even more audacious in the context of white solidarity during Reconstruction, particularly because he liked to gore his neighbor's Lost Cause ox. Harris's position was

genuinely felt; he was not merely kowtowing to the predilections of northern editors. Harriet Tewksbury, a spinsterish Yankee character and suffragette crusader in *Azalia*, is described as having the “genuine American spirit,” a mixture of “provinciality, patriotism, and originality.” Harris’s respect for the type is unfeigned. When Harriett Tewksberry curtly dismisses a “Southron” book peddler hawking Civil War histories, one distinctly hears Harris’s voice as she bemoans the “arrested development” of the South.

Numerous commentators have urged that Billy Sanders furnishes the most completely realized character in the Harris menagerie, save perhaps Uncle Remus. There is much of Huck Finn about Billy Sanders, who incarnates Harris’s middle Georgia type. Sanders is a gadfly philosopher king who is expert in all things including some he did not know about, and master of none. Harris used Sanders to furnish moral advice in *Uncle Remus’s Magazine*, some of it ignored by the heedless “boys” on the staff in one of Harris’s favorite tricks of verisimilitude. Billy Sanders made his first appearance as a cracker sent to kidnap Abraham Lincoln in order to stop the war in the novelette “The Kidnapping of President Lincoln,” collected in *On the Wing of Occasions* (1900). Sanders and Lincoln get along smashingly, and the Georgian is diverted from his mission. Both men are endowed with “country sense” and an uncommon measure of common sense. Lincoln exclaims that it is ““a joyous relief to meet a man who knows how to say things, and who doesn’t want a post-office for himself, or his wife’s cousin.”” Providentially, the plot goes unrealized, in part, because of the would-be kidnapper’s admiration. Harris’s recasting of Civil War events injects a degree of good-natured humor that Lincoln would no doubt have found appealing. It has little in common with Lost Cause era stock tales of southern valor.

and hanged. The incident provides the title for the novelette. Billy Sanders recollects, “I could feel the shadder of that black, swingin’ thing right betwixt my shoulder blades...”⁵⁰

Harris brought in inter-sectional romances to probe the complexities of peacemaking. He paired southern women off with Yankees in the stories “Trouble on Lost Mountain” and “A Story of the War,” and again in the novelette *Azalia*. “A Story of the War” (1880) brings together themes of racial and sectional hatchet-burying. In the first version, Uncle Remus kills a Union sharpshooter who had Mars Jeems in his sights. When Harris reworked the story for a book, the Yankee is shot in the arm and nursed to health by Sally and Remus. The plot is clearly contrived to push the characters to reconciliation, and, predictably, Sally marries the Yankee. Years later, when Remus explains how he met John (the Yankee), his sister exclaims “But you cost him an arm.” Remus’s response is striking (although some might say cloying); he points out that he “gave” Sally to John, and, holding up his own arms, indicates his labor.

If that ending seems unsatisfactory, or just a variation on the ubiquitous antebellum faithful retainer theme, of which “Free Joe” is an undisputed masterpiece (“Free Joe” was based on a real person and was Harris’s favorite story), consider the story of “Ananias.” Ananias is a brutally ugly slave who returns to the plantation after fighting for the Union, ostensibly to settle his master’s mistaken impression that he is unfaithful. He stands wrongly accused of revealing the family stores to Yankee marauders, and is generally regarded as “not a negro in whom one could repose confidence.”

But here the shopworn story takes an interesting turn. The plantation’s inhabitants—rather predictably, a colonel and his daughter—have been bankrupted by the war. Colonel Flewellen spent more of his time in the library than in the field, and without the support of

overseers and the like, he is helpless, resembling nothing so much as one of W.J. Cash's sham cavaliers. "To all appearances—and he managed to keep up appearances to the last—he was richer than many of his neighbors, for he had a comfortable house, and he still had credit in the town." His creditors "admire the colonel for what he had been," but one of them, a Snopesesque gouger named Jones, has taken the colonel to the bank.

Because Ananias is determined to recover his dignity, he supports himself and the etiolated Flewellens. Reviving a Joe Harris newspaper argument, the omniscient narrator observes, "In the old days he had been compelled to work, but now he was working of his own free-will and to please himself. The result was that he worked much harder." When Ananias returns some portion of the Flewellen's harvest to the family, the usurious Jones prosecutes him for theft under thin pretenses. The "morality of desperation," and the theme of theft, a mainstay of southern literature, are both familiar enough, but Harris turns it around. Ananias has his day in court, as Harris pointedly calls it, "the State *versus* Ananias Flewellen, *alias* Ananias Harper—a name he had since taken in freedom." The story emerges that the proud but unskilled plantation family was saved from "bodaciously" starving themselves to death by Ananias's good offices. The clear implication is that white prosperity was carried on black shoulders. To suggest that white southerners depended on their black charges for their very survival was a bold stroke.

Harris's outsiderism and self-perceived humble racial caste probably helped along his sympathetic portrait. "Ananias" appears in *Balaam and his Master* (1891), a volume also remarkable for a story called "Where's Duncan?" As Bruce Bickley has observed, quite astutely, the tale clearly preconfigures the themes and indeed some of the imagery of Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!* and *Light in August* (In *Gabriel Tolliver*, Harris has

characters named Absalom and Vardeman). It is a realistic tale of miscegenation in which a boy's father mysteriously comes to hate him. Isaiah, the narrator, is highly reminiscent of Joseph Conrad's creations, and, for that matter, of Melville's haunted narrators. Although the tale opens with a kind of apology ("when I take a pen in my hand my mind takes all sorts of uncertain flights, like a pigeon with a hawk after it"), the import is deadly serious—as is, it will be noticed, the conceit by which he describes his mind's operations. The "colorist" seems to have writhed in the dark night of his soul, and tapped a deep, dark fund to produce a story writhing with nightmarish guilt.

The story is set in 1826, and follows a caravan bearing cotton to Augusta. In describing the progress, the narrator observes "scenes such as have never been described in any of the books that profess to tell about life in the South before the war." After dinner, "the niggers would sing, dance and wrestle, and the white men would gather to egg them on," bringing to mind Sutpen's traffic with his slaves in Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*. Along the way a "dark-featured" rounder named Willis Featherstone—a suitably Hawthornian name, for Hawthorne was one of Harris's favorite writers—falls in with the party. Willis casts spells of gypsy enchantment when he plays his fiddle. He also has racially ambiguous, perhaps even satanic qualities—a dark "stranger" with a black beard and a penchant for riddles. He tells a story of a boy whose father began to hate him, and "in a fit of anger, sold him to a nigger speculator." Willis will not divulge whether he was the son of his own story, or who the boy's mother was, promising only that the riddle will be "unriddled." It is Isaiah, the prophet of doomed nations, who reveals the cipher of race to the reader. Willis Featherstone—whom Isaiah "watched like a hawk," and of whom the slaves ask whether he is a "sho-nuff white man"—acts as the medium.

The plot machinery has been installed at this point, but the story is relieved by Harris's nearly confessional tone. There is a dash of Poe in the story's gothic goulash, and yet "Crooked-Leg Jake" has Harris fingerprints. Later a mulatto woman with "hair black and straight as that of an Indian" and a "wolfish" countenance, joins the party at the leave of a nearby plantation. When Willis asks her suddenly, "Where's Duncan?" she is aghast. The confrontation is identifiably melodramatic, in the sense that it springs from the stage, a point that Harris returns to later. She falls to her knees and hugs his legs before running off into the woods crying, "He sold my onliest boy!"

That night a commotion erupts at a nearby plantation, and a horrific scene ensues. Harris hits on a staple of Irish folk belief: the night augurs ill. That is, the birds give sign that something is afoot. Not only do the stock animals tug at their halters, but "the chickens on the hill were cackling, and somewhere near, a flock of geese was screaming." Nothing remains for Harris to do but set his gothic house on fire.

When the party runs to the mansion and peers inside, "the candles on the sideboard and the flaring flames lit up the affair until it looked like some of the spectacles I have since seen in theatres, only it was more terrible." Harris maintains a dispassionate, theatrical distance. The house is already burning, and the mulatto "shriek[s]," "Where's Duncan?" She gets no reply before "plung[ing] the carving-knife into his body," twice, "a sickening sight" to which Isaiah closes his eyes. Immediately afterward, the roof falls in, issuing "an eruption of sparks and smoke and flame, accompanied by a violent roaring noise that sounded like the culmination of a storm." Into this sound and fury, signifying a great deal, fly the displaced pigeons. "Occasionally one more frightened than the rest would dart headlong into the flames, and it was curious to see the way it disappeared. There would be a

fizz and a sputter, and the poor bird would be burnt harder than a crackling. I observed this and other commonplace things with unusual interest—an interest sharpened, perhaps, but the fact that there could be no hope for the two human beings on whom the roof had fallen.”⁵¹

The scene could scarcely be more terrifying, and it was probably especially so for Harris himself, since he immolates birds and dogs, critters that had been his boon psychic companions, in the process of tearing down the racial edifice. It keeps Isaiah awake of nights, and when he dreams about the affair, the malodor of lynching hangs over him: “the fumes of burning flesh seem to fill [his] nostrils.” The story concludes with the suggestion that one of the slaves may have glimpsed Willis seated in the room, “enjoying the spectacle. It may be so. At any rate, none of us ever saw him again.” Again, the *spectacle* of staged behavior. Perhaps Harris, the bastard son, went as deep as he dared go into his own psychological dungeon, and sat with him. The closing line masterfully inculcates the reader: “As for the rest, you know as much about it as I do.” Any adherent to the racial order would know the rest of the story, and the unspeakable racial knowledge to which Harris obliquely alludes.



Illustration 27. Harris's favorite chirper, appropriately, the Mockingbird. ⁵²

This is hardly Uncle Remus fare. It is a breathtaking story that reveals Harris taking the full measure of artistic license. The numinous fictional excursion leads Harris to his heart of darkness: his bastardy. It is shockingly unpleasant, particularly when considered within the context of the soft fiction of the day. For Harris, as for Faulkner, the starting place is racial order. He is fairly convulsed by racial “transgressions”; when boundaries are crossed, horrendous violence cannot be far behind. His mulatto is weirdly ambiguous. Though she meets a tragic end, she does not quite fit the “tragic” template, insofar as she quite handily, proactively, and willfully butchers her master, who, the reader infers, lied to her about her son’s disappearance. Harris makes of her a cross between a demoness and quite literally a bitch gone mad with grief. Earlier, “her white teeth gleamed in the firelight like so many fangs”; in mortal combat, she circles her master, and they jockey “like two bull-dogs fighting.” She is, in short, a grotesque distorted to Faulknerian dimensions. Nothing would suggest that she played a role in her son’s sale, and there may be an element of distancing in treating her “animal” fury.

All of which is to show that Harris styled himself more of an *anti-southern* writer than a southern one. His was a multiplex southern identity, and he wrote as boldly as circumstances permitted. If he was not an out-and-out iconoclast, he was sailing dangerously close to the wind in some of his best work.

His more dashing literary excursions belie a deep-seated desire for acceptance, perhaps even the stunted social growth of a man who preferred animal company to human, and who sought the approval of children more ardently than his coevals. His journalistic

personas and framed tales permitted him to adopt the arch, disinterested voice of a socially established observer with superior education. Harris was every bit the *Englishman* within his milieu, and an unmistakably English voice permeates some of his children's tales. (He goofed in one of his letters to Lillian and Mildred, "til to-day we have been having what the British call 'nawsty weather, dontcherno.'" ⁵³) He also affected the part of a middle Georgian expatriate living in London in some of his columns. The "Anne MacFarland" columns, as the *nom de plume* appeared in *Uncle Remus Magazine*, gave Harris a chance to dilate on principles of literary criticism. Because he hated criticism, he never wanted to give it, but the alter ego emboldened him. Henry James's diction is "painful" to him; he contemns *The House of Mirth*, though he admires its technique, because it is peopled with irredeemable "buzzards." He took the extraordinary step of attempting to hide the identity from his staff, who were not that credulous, but winked at Anne MacFarland nonetheless.

Harris's own confusion of identities, his literary "trickster" ways, may have generated some of the fog surrounding his real identity. Though he at times he denied it, he wanted to be a writer of the first rank. He showed his starch as a New South meliorist calling for conciliatory "neighborliness" without grandstanding, and was rewarded with the middling respectability afforded to journalists. Yet he wanted to be *good*, not merely popular, and worried incessantly about being exposed as a "fraud." He seemed incapable of cultivating a sense of self-worth. Robert Underwood Johnson recorded in his memoir, "We had confidence in Harris, and—perceiving that he had little in himself—we expressed it." Harris sent his stories to *Scribner's*, because the editor there reassured him. "The main reason I send most of my stuff to 'Scribner's,'" he wrote to Edward L. Burlingame, "is due to the fact that your letters, now and again, seem to breathe a note of appreciation." Any negative

criticism of his novels—and he had plenty of it—he took as damning, but he luxuriated in any small praise.

Again, there was his sense of otherness. He sometimes referred to himself as Uncle Remus, and it is quite possible that he took refuge in “being as humble as his black character, as self-deprecating as the most obsequious of the Sambo stereotypes.” He accepted Twain’s praise for his work obliquely: “You cannot escape my gratitude for your kindness to Uncle Remus.”⁵⁴

It is tempting to see Harris as the white analog to the avuncular black yarnspinners he created, trapped in an obstinately shy body. It is a confusion that he encouraged, and there may be some truth in it, but it is not the whole truth, and it strips Harris of the human complexity that has sustained his stories, even in allegorical terms. First of all, for such a widely-read man, he achieved a splendid degree of isolation. Harris’s popularity, in his own time, rivaled Twain’s, but he stood outside the inner circle of southern elites. He wriggled away from admirers and rusticated whenever he could, until his desire for solitude subsided into loneliness.

Indeed, he was born to it. The unpublished journal of Mary Fielder (1808-84) contains an 1882 entry, cryptically worded: “No boy in the streets of Eatonton had as gloomy a prospect before him as he appeared to have for he [had] not only poverty to contend with, but other things.”⁵⁵ Harris himself validated the notion when he wrote in 1870, “My history is a peculiarly sad and unfortunate one.”

Obviously, there were many things that one did not speak of in those days, or for a long time after. Harris had started binge-drinking during his salad days as a reporter, when his confreres gleefully reported his besotted misadventures after they plied him with drink;

one callous account that ran in the newspaper quoted him, after four or five glasses of beer, in the stutter that so mortified him, “c-a-n-’t s-a-y z-a-c-t-l-y t-i-s t-s-i-c-a-t-i-n” but “it makes the tongue awfully thick.” In any event, the habit stayed with him. He was hard hit by the death of his two-year-old son, Evan, in 1878. He blamed himself for passing measles to the child, and may have turned to the milk of mercy for consolation, leading to a reproach from his mother-in-law, who warned him to give the stuff up altogether. Two other children, Mary Esther “Rosebud” Harris (1879-1882) and Linton Harris (1883-1890), died prematurely. The fatherless catcher-in-the-rye could only stand by while his worst fears transpired. No doubt he was lashed by the tortures of guilt and, seeking a palliative, repaired more often to Snap-Bean Farm, a few miles out in the country. The place name came from a play on “Sabine”; here too, Harris was both folksy and conciliatory. (The Sabines, after all, were conquered by the Romans and reconciled only by the pleas of their women.) It was Harris’s *sanctum sanctorum*; even his wife rarely accompanied him to his hideaway. He felt his creative powers waning in the last years of his life, and rumors from the help—which are usually reliable in the end—said that he was drinking. To spare his sons from the hardships of an inherited vice, he once warned Julian, “I am not much of a Puritan myself, and I have tried to so conform my views to yours as to enable you to say that I have never denied you anything that would tend to give you real pleasure. All I ask in return is that you won’t drink whiskey or other spirits.”⁵⁶ The temptation for Harris had always been to withdraw, and he was succumbing.

Harris was surprisingly honest about himself in his writing. In *Gabriel Tolliver* (1902), Harris relates an anecdote about Mr. Sanders, whose erratic conduct became a “seven days’ wonder in Shady Dale.”

As Mrs. Absalom declared, he had tucked his good-humor under the bed, and was now going about in a state of gloom. This at least was the general impression; but Mr. Sanders was not gloomy. He was filled to the brim with impatience, and was to be seen constantly walking the streets, or occupying his favourite seat on the court-house steps, the seat that had always attracted him when he was communing with John Barleycorn.... He avoided the companionship of those who were in the habit of seeking him out to enjoy his drolleries; and various rumours flew about as to the cause of his apparent troubles. He was on the point of joining the church, having had enough of the world's sinfulness.... In short, when a man is as prominent in a community as Mr. Sanders was in Shady Dale, he must pay such penalty as gossip levies when his conduct becomes puzzling or problematical.⁵⁷

It is impossible not to hear the assonance with Harris's own life, at low ebb, in this late writing, and his sense of being harried by irresponsible "tittle-tattle." For Sanders, Harris's optimistic alter-ego, the bleak moment is fully reversible; for Harris, it became something of a permanent condition. The habit of stealing away for some peace and quiet, and perhaps to spend time with the euphemistic John Barleycorn, grew more frequent. In his battle over against melancholia, he was slipping.

And then there was Harris's childhood baggage. As he wrote in *Gabriel Tolliver*, "Age can find no comfort for itself unless it can make terms with youth."⁵⁸ Incredibly, the "Harris-as-affable-Remus" version of his life's story has largely concealed a simple truth of his life: drinking sped his death from kidney damage and cirrhosis. Which is not to dwell on unpleasantness, nor to ferret out the tragedy in a foreshortened life that was in most respects exemplary, nor even to reduce it to the level of banal defeat. Rather, I wish to raise the point that if biographers have been so chary about essential facts of his life, and gotten some of them wrong, is it not at least possible that major portions of his character escaped notice altogether? In this respect, Harris's Catholicism is quite possibly underrated, if not exactly unnoticed.

Which brings us to the final example of Harris's unsouthernness, his greatest instance of apostasy from the southern fold, and oddly enough, perhaps the least noted: his conversion. Harris is usually described as a spiritual, not conventionally religious man, in the instantly recognizable cliché, apparently on the strength of these facts: he attended church irregularly, if at all; he received no particular instruction in his childhood, save what fell to him by way of circuit riders and camp meetings and his Methodist's mother's desultory Bible readings; yet he held deep moral convictions, expressed them frequently in his homespun way, and was known for his deeply-lived, unvarnished lovingkindness. Few writers seem to have been so singularly compelled by Kurt Vonnegut's maxim, spoken bluntly by Mr. Rosewater, "Goddammit, you've got to be *kind*." Unfortunately, Harris's has left few tracks by which his path through the *selva oscura* (dark forest, as Dante would give it) might be followed, and the record remains largely empty of his motivations for crossing quickly and late over the threshold of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church.

The world at large first learned of Harris's conversion on word of his death. The *Atlanta Constitution* announced both on July 3, 1908, two weeks after his baptism. If Harris had already been baptized as a Protestant, protocol would have required that he "recant his errors or heresy." Father Jackson, who baptized him, noted that "Mr. Harris had not been received in any other church, hence he received this Sacrament absolutely, and would have made his first Holy Communion, had it not been for the nature of his sickness, which prevented him from receiving it."⁵⁹ He would have been in a position to receive three sacraments in short order: baptism, the required confession, and extreme unction before his passing.

The conversion did not escape the attention of the authors of the 1911 edition of the Catholic Encyclopedia.

His favourite reading—the Bible, Newman, Faber, à Kempis, and Sheehan—his mental honesty, and the example of his wife, a cultured Canadian Catholic (the Mary Bullard of “Gabriel Tolliver”), to whom he credited his mental growth and the best that was in him, had long convinced him of Catholic truth. But a sensitive modesty that shunned notoriety and crowds, and confined him to the society of his family, restrained him from seeking baptism till 20 June 1908, a few weeks before his death. He died with the sole regret that he had so long deferred his entrance into the Catholic Church.⁶⁰

This is almost certainly valetudinarian, but it supports the entirely reasonable theory that Harris made a second trip to the altar at the behest of his wife, and the interpretation is bolstered by Julia Harris’s handling of the matter, which was not in print until years later. Ten years prior to his death, according to her, Harris had received instruction from Father James M. O’Brien at the Catholic Church in Washington, Georgia. O’Brien might have wished to bring Joe Harris into the fold, but he died first. Sister Sacred Heart wrote to Harris—as one naturally would, of a sainted Irish priest since departed—“Dear Father O’Brien! We miss him more and more. If he remembers his friends, which we believe he does more prayerfully than on earth, he is still interceding for you; ‘the one thing necessary’, he thought was coming to you through him.”⁶¹ The one thing necessary, in a Biblical sense, was Mary’s election to serve Jesus, and so it is inferred that Father O’Brien made a mortal mission of Harris’s conversion.

In any event, Julia Harris’s account has her father-in-law requesting baptism during one of Father O.N. Jackson’s sick-visits. Jackson leaves the room to share the news with the family. “Mother, of course, was very happy, as she had long looked forward to the time when father would be willing to avow his acceptance of the faith.” Joe Harris asked his wife

what she said when she heard. “I told him how happy I was,” she replied; and father seemed to feel well content in her happiness.

According to the account quoted from Jackson, Harris wanted everyone to know that his choice was carefully considered. “I want all my family here,” he said, in Jackson’s recollection, “and want it to be known that I am doing this with my own free will, fully realizing that I have put it off too long already.” Jackson recounted that Harris made his profession of faith in front of his family, “and felt satisfied that he had done what God asked him to do.” The priest visited regularly during the last two weeks of his late convert’s life, “and always in some way he referred to his regret over not taking the step earlier, for fear, as he expressed it, that some might say that the ‘he did it because he was dying.’” Acknowledging that “procrastination has been the bugbear of my life,” Harris purportedly told Jackson that “years ago I had fully made up my mind to become a Catholic, but some event prevented my doing so.”⁶² A line from *Gabriel Tolliver*—“He was on the point of joining the church, having had enough of the world’s sinfulness”—suggests that it had indeed played on his mind for years.

Harris also gave his influence: “The example of my wife and children has taught me more about the Church than anything else.” His wife, Esther LaRose (“Essie”) had been instrumental in founding nearby Saint Anthony’s Church, and she had tugged on Joe Harris’s pursestrings to that end; he paid for the land. (Later he would grouse, “I suppose there is not to be found a congregation as stingy and as close-fisted as that of the church over which Father Bazin presides. It is a fact that I have heard Protestants talking about it on the street-cars, and I am ashamed when I hear it.”)⁶³ In the august *New York Times* account of his death, Harris’s last words, reported with Victorian aplomb, befit a lifetime seeker: “I have

always been curious to know what was on the other side,” followed by, “I am very tired.” But Julia Harris gives them in response to Julian, asking how he felt, “and he had replied, with a glint of the old twinkle in his eye, ‘I am about the extent of a tenth of a gnat’s eyebrow better.’”⁶⁴

Julia Harris’s faded (and flawed) classic affirms the particulars of the Catholic Encyclopedia gloss. Most biographers have stopped there, or passed by the matter of Harris’s faith quickly, considering it incidental to his philosophy. Bruce Bickley, Harris’s finest biographer, wonders if he did not take Paschal up on his famous wager, at the eleventh hour, and points to Essie’s influence.⁶⁵ Essie Harris “wore the pants”; in one of his letters, Joe wrote, “The New York *Sun* of Sunday had a sketch and portrait of your dad. The sketch said I had married a Miss La Bosse. I shall write to the editor and say that your mother was not La Bosse before I married her, but that she is certainly La Bosse now.”⁶⁶

This was no trifling matter. In general, too little attention has been devoted to a middle Georgian’s decision to marry a Catholic, a choice freighted with important ramifications. Paul Cousins gives Harris’s marriage to Esther LaRose, a strong-willed and ebullient French-Canadian, thus: “Their mutual love resolved the differences in their geographical and cultural backgrounds, and after a courtship of little more than a year they were married on the evening of April 20, 1873, by Bishop Perisco of the Catholic church at his residence with only Esther’s parents in attendance.”⁶⁷ It is one of the few times she appears in the book (later, it is mentioned that she helped to protect her husband’s privacy). Cousins approaches the subject of religious division between French Canadian and Georgia Protestant decorously; perhaps that is one of the factors implicit in the scope of their “cultural backgrounds.” This was a time when Catholic/Protestant marriages were openly opposed by

the Church (the Church designated them “mixed marriages” that conduced to “grave danger” for the Catholic involved), not to mention culturally *verboten*. The obstacles were not institutionally insuperable, but they were forbidding. The couple may have been forced to apply for a dispensation showing “grave necessity” or other good cause, in addition to satisfying the traditional requirements (“that the Catholic party be allowed free exercise of religion, that all the offspring are to be brought up Catholics and that the Catholic party promise to do all that is possible to convert the non-Catholic”). Essie Harris discharged her duties faithfully in raising her Catholic brood, but they seem not to have taken matters so seriously, or else yielded to Protestant hegemony, as none married a coreligionist.⁶⁸

For a woman who played a large role in his life, she remains too faint a presence in biographical literature. The anecdotal style of early twentieth century biography, and its epistolary proofs of manly substance, has left a checkered record poor in firsthand accounts. Alone of the Harris biographers, only Cousins had the advantage of interviewing sources who were intimate with the shy writer. Gratefully, with the publication of his family correspondence, a fuller portrait of Harris’s religious conviction is emerging. The title of *Dearest Chums and Partners: Joel Chandler Harris’s Letters to his Children* (1993) immediately reveals the disarmingly intimate tone of its pages, and announces the “morally earnest” concern he nurtured for his children, which may have bordered on the over-protective (he grew very anxious when his son Julian failed to wire news of his safe arrival in New York, for example). Especially striking is Harris’s multifaceted sense of *care*; he went to great lengths to remain involved with his children, and to do no harm in the course of his traffic. His exceeding gentleness forbade him to tease when he risked being misunderstood. On one occasion he wrote to rectify the possible misimpression that he wanted his daughter

to have perfect marks. "I am proud of the many 100s but I am also a trifle proud of the 98 and 99 in French. It shows that, like your pappy, you are a true Georgia cracker. You will be able to get over this after a while...."⁶⁹

The letters are so tender, and so charmingly creative in their content, that Harris comes off as the father we might all wish to have. He wrote to Julian when he was college-bound, "Remember that learning is merely an accomplishment and not a virtue, and if [your elders] seem to you to be ignorant, bear in mind that, in turn, you will seem ignorant to your descendants."⁷⁰ Writing to "Billy Ann"—his affectionate sobriquet for Lillian—he offers her some advice on using the Kodak camera he sent her. "I enclose the 'developed' films. They have but one trouble—All, all are double." One would have to own a heart of steel not to be moved by some of these letters. He begins one with a catalogue of worldly troubles:

...wind blowing a gale from the nor'west, thrashing out the roses, making thin-skinned people feel as if they had lost home and friends and country...apples rotting; stove smoking; dry good bills heavy; bonnet bill heavier....

Now, how do you suppose I can find any news to write while all this is going on? More than that, how do you suppose I survive the infliction? Well, I'll tell you, Billy-Ann: I laugh at it. I'm just as happy, almost, when things are going wrong, as I am when they are going right; and for very good reason. It doesn't amount to a row of pins. There's nothing funnier than see small troubles disappear when you laugh at them. They seem to get ashamed of themselves and run away.⁷¹

If the advice sounds familiar, it should, although it comes more familiarly in Uncle Remus vernacular. As usual, the correspondence brims with love, and one need not be a parent to appreciate how carefully Harris cultivated his garden. Evidently, his laissez-faire parenting had certain moral boundaries, where the boys were concerned particularly, but the Harris household was one in which idiosyncrasy was very well tolerated. Harris chuckles to report that "Mildred went about everywhere last week wearing a button with this awful

warning: ‘Don’t pull my leg.’ I said to her, ‘Mildred, you are a girl; you ought not to be wearing such a button as that.’ She replied: ‘Yes, pap, I know I’m a girl, and that’s the reason I’m wearing the button.’”⁷² (Harris was meticulous about using gender-inclusive language; *Uncle Remus’s Magazine* often ran articles of interest to the developing feminist movements of the time, and the Harris girls proved to be spirited representatives of the age). The sheer volume of the correspondence is astonishing, and it shows again how Harris felt most comfortable behind the desk (Harris had courted his wife partly by running romantic, pseudonymous verse in the paper). Taken in the aggregate, the letters trace what scholar Hugh Keenan deems Harris’s “extensive interest in the Roman Catholic Church from the time Lillian entered Saint Joseph’s academy.”

It is indeed extensive, and it unfolds a previously untold portion of the writer’s life. Harris regularly closed his letters with greetings to the sisters—in part, because they read the mails and gave their watchful *nihil obstat*—and his affection is apparently sincere. He mentions his friendship with sundry priests, and evinces an awareness of issues facing the Catholic Church. He praises specific instances of the nuns’ character, “heaven-born” talent and teachings, offers short skits with roles for the girls and their instructors, and passes along news of Catholic import. “I shall never get through congratulating myself that we placed you in the care of those devoted sisters,” he wrote. “It will be worth more to you [Lillian Harris] in all ways than any other experience you’ll ever have.”

From the letters, we learn that Harris knew of the goings-on in his own church. In one letter, he writes of sending his wife to confession, specifically to “Fr. Kennedy, who knows her voice. She vowed she wouldn’t, and she didn’t. She went to Fr. Bazin, who doesn’t know her....”⁷³ Harris attended his daughter Mildred’s confirmation, and noted that

“more than a hundred people were confirmed...among them three or four colored people.”⁷⁴ Of Archbishop Gross, he says, “General Toombs once told me that the Archbishop was one of the most brilliant men he had ever met.”⁷⁵ He also remarked the attempts of Mrs. Shehan Moody to set up a Manning society—“imagine Mama writing an essay on the works of Eusebius”—and commends Cardinal Newman, “the poet of the Church” whose volumes he finds “entrancing,” in Manning’s stead. (Julia Harris identified Newman’s *Apologia* as the “most powerful single influence that swayed his later years.”)⁷⁶ Aware that Sister Bernard at the academy “smiles” at the notion, he adds, “But instead of that, here they go attitudinizing, and pretending to do something which only the learned doctors of the Church have done. It is, indeed, really too funny. It is like a parcel of hens scratching for acorns under the most beautiful tree in the world. With people who think, the main thing about the acorn is the tree that grows from it.”

Then, with characteristic humility, he cuts himself off from attitudinizing, with a self-deprecating joke: “—But how easy it is for a young man to grow serious and begin to lecture. I’m afraid I’m too smart to be healthy. That’s the reason I’m thin.”⁷⁷

Reporting a comical mishap when a stove pipe deposited its soot on Essie Harris’s face, Harris “casually remarked [at supper] that there are more than seven hundred ways of getting dirty respectably.” “I was told to go somewhere and select me a perfectly clean wife. I answered that the Church does not allow divorces. The reply was that I was not a Catholic—to which I answered that having become (as it were) a brother-in-law of the church, with the hope and expectation of a closer relation when I felt good enough, I felt bound to conform to the rules in so far as I could. Well, it was a great time.”⁷⁸

As an impious lad, when he attended the Baptist church with some of his coevals, “he made rotary motions on the outer side of the pew on which they were sitting as if he were grinding an organ, audibly imitating organ notes. Much to his embarrassment and his companions’ amusement, he continued to make his grinding motions and sounds after the congregation had finished the hymn.”⁷⁹ Conforming to the rules, Protestant and Catholic, seemed to be a matter of wry bemusement to Harris, who found it all very doctrinaire. “Great trouble among the deacons and sub-deacons of Park Street Methodist Church” came up when a certain Dr. Longino, apostle of the germ-theory of disease, announced that a shared communion cup was unsanitary and dangerous. Suggestions, including individual cups and a dishwasher, were offered. “This [hole in ms.] like sacrilege, and it would be if our Methodist brethren had a proper idea of communion; but Mrs. Culberson told me the facts. The propositions were actually made. I thought this was funny at first, but now that I have written it out, it seems more like a disgusting display of ignorance and worldliness on the part of the deacons and sub-deacons.”⁸⁰ This last may have been added to placate the nuns.

Gauging by the letters, Harris knew his doctrine as well as his history. He explained to Lillian that the Spanish were out of step with the times, although they once “laid claim to this whole continent, and actually held a large part of it.” “In old times, he explained, “Catholics believed that a monarchy was of divine origin....”

But times have changed. Americans do not hold any such belief. The Pope himself not very long ago wrote a letter to the Bishops of France and warned them that they owed their political allegiance to whatever form of government the people found satisfactory. He did this because the bishops were opposed to the republic—and a very poor republic it is, being entirely different from ours. I gather from the Holy Father’s letters (or encyclicals) to American Bishops that he admires the American republic. He is a very great statesman (aside from his holy office) and ranks—in my mind—with Gladstone.⁸¹

A majority of the dozens of letters record some incident of Catholic interest, and the many lagniappes that were traded between the circle of nuns, priests, and Joe Harris. These are too numerous to repeat, but one letter stands out particularly.

...My regards to Sister Bernard, and say to her that I am glad and grateful that she is praying for a special favor to me. I think I know what it is, and the idea is growing more and more pleasing to me every day. Say to her that if he [sic] had been raised a Protestant she would know how hard it is to root out of the mind the **mean prejudices** and doubts and fiction that have been educated into it. This is the task I am engaged in now. There are only small and insignificant **weeds in my mind** at this time, but I want to have them all cleared out and thrown over the fence in the trash-pile. My regards also to Sister Mary Louis. [emphasis added]⁸²

The phrasing shows that the Cornfield Journalist approached a matter dear to his heart. Harris had earlier written of “mowing down the old prejudices that rattle in the wind like weeds” as the high calling of his journalistic career. He may have perceived anti-Catholic bias as another “mean prejudice,” one that he intended to weed out of himself. The letter gives positive proof that Harris contemplated conversion more than ten years in advance of taking the step. Taken together, the letters make clear that Harris was not “flirting” with faith, or affecting a passing intellectual curiosity to satisfy his family. Rather, the intimate epistolary window that they open on his life reveals years of soberly considered orientation to the church, a competent familiarity with its rites, and an abiding friendliness to its work. Harris’s coming-to-faith, viewed in this light, is not a matter of last-minute haste, but of his own evolving desire for authenticity. His own words make it clear that he did not want to be thought of as an under-the-wire, extreme unction convert.

Apart from the letters, Harris wrote “A Belle of St. Velerien,” set in Esther LaRose’s own French Quebec, around the same time, and it shows him working through his religious

views fictionally. Euphrasie, a character based euphonically and literally on Esther, pure and tender-hearted, but as “inquisitive as a weasel,” she is the belle of the town. Of her the narrator asks, “What is bolder than innocence?” Euphrasie is eager to move South to an American mill town, the grass being ever greener, and she latches on to a stranger visiting town named Pettingill. If Pettingill is Harris’s analog, he is an odd choice. Pettingill is a crass American and something of a skulk. Upon meeting a man who speaks only French, he answers, “If he can walk in English, that’s enough for me”; he disdains his accommodation, saying “It ain’t bigger’n a squirrel cage—and he soon strikes up a flirtation with the Valerien vixen. Euphrasie’s father, already alienated from his increasingly willful daughter and perceiving that the savage American will steal her away, comes after Pettingill with a knife. Pettingill whirls around, only to see the knife-wielding Canadian with a priest in hot pursuit. “Like a flash his mind recurred to the stories he had read of Roman Catholics, and now, here before his eyes, as he imagined, was an emissary of the Pope about to administer discipline.”

Actually, the priest is Pettingill’s intercessor and the *frère directeur* of the Marist brothers. The priest prevents the outraged father from stabbing the American. Pettingill blusters a bit (“I’ll give him a tetch of the United States that’ll last him”), dusts himself off, and cuts out of town. Subsequently, Joi Billette, Euphrasie’s father, goes missing for a few days. A joyful reconciliation is effected when she discovers him in the care of the good Marist brother. The story befits a man who is attempting to cut down his own prejudices, but who casts about oafishly in the alien territory. Pettingill does not have a chance to experience the goodness of the Marists firsthand, and leaves the foreign country none the wiser. But Harris, the writer, already has an intimation that what he has read may not be true.

Harris was no stranger to issues of faith, and the unmistakably Christian moral background of his various writings speaks for itself. There is one other source that gives firsthand insight into Harris's faith journey. "In the Matter of Belief" ran in the last issue of *Uncle Remus's Magazine* to be published while he was alive.⁸³ The piece seems to have been written in a hurry, or else not much edited, but it is nonetheless masterful. He was characteristically sensitive to the rebuke from a reader who disliked an observation he had tendered in an earlier editorial. Harris had written, "There is nothing truer, or more wholesome or more far-reaching, or more educative than the creations of a sane and healthy imagination. The legend of Santa Claus is true for the reason that it connects the childish mind with the mysteries of religion, and is a long step in the direction of real belief." This did not play well to fundamentalists, and a writer from Calhoun, Georgia, rebuffed him publicly in the *Times*, "The first sentence in the above may be as true as the Gospel, but we consider the last sentence very poor theology."

"The Farmer," as he referred to himself in the magazine editorials, was brought up short, and set about wearily mustering a kind of theological defense that refused to be theological. It was the first time Harris had attempted any such thing, and he comes off a bit defensively at first. "Well, it is not theology at all, and therefore, the poorer theology it is, the better it is; for the Farmer doesn't run with the theologians, nor is he inclined to split hairs with those who consider themselves theologians. Religion has been given its scientific side, of course, but those who make a complete and an exhaustive study of divinity, and, no doubt, it is very interesting to those who are versed in it, and who knows how to fire off the guns of rhetoric and logic." He consistently refuses to get embroiled in unproductive theological debate, but Harris went to some pains to show that he is mettlesome, having

heard those “guns” before, and likens them to a child firing blanks at the side of a barn—“he has filled the air with smoke and noise, but when all is over, no one is a whit the worse.”

That is because, in his reckoning, true Christian theology is changeless. “We may have new fashions in literature,” he observes, “and we may have new belief growing out of new knowledge; but for two thousand years there has been nothing essentially new about the Christian religion.” Using the example of a rather heretical preacher who became disenchanted with the concept of Incarnation, Harris makes the case that this sort of intellectualism is destructive to belief. “The Gospels themselves were written by any hand save the ones to which they are credited,” he acknowledges, and cautions that Doubt assails the young faithful in an age of science. The argument is in perfect sympathy with many of Henry Adams’s observations about the allure of the modern Dynamo, in contrast with the epochal achievement represented in the cathedral.

But Harris recuses himself, and refuses to err in worshipping the institution rather than what it represents. “The Farmer might have left it to the pulpit to make out the argument and complete it; but he has come to discover that the pulpit is no broader than the men that fill it—and some of them are wonderfully narrow-chested.” He also prods complaisant preachers who “preach a perfunctory sermon under which the members of their congregations can sleep comfortably. Now, this sort of thing may be in the domain of theology—may be a definite part of its curriculum—but certainly it has little to do with religion, the religion of which the Savior was the founder.” Later he intones, “Morality is not religion, however desirable it may be in and of itself.” And he reminds the reader, “We must become as little children.” The Biblical mandate is intensely personal for Harris: “Who does not desire in his heart of hearts to imitate the fresh innocence of the youngsters who come

and go before our eyes, and who contribute in such large measure to the satisfaction which we have in life? The Farmer knows that He who creates life, which is the greatest mystery of all, is fully equal to the production of all other mysteries and miracles.”

The essay borrows extensively from Catholic belief, particularly in its appropriation of the concept of mystery, and the special religious register of that word. “Each individual soul must consider the matter [of Incarnation] for itself, and it must abolish all consideration of physical and material phenomena. It must use its own spiritual logic and reason in considering the matter, and must realize that it is in the presence of the greatest mystery, the greatest miracle, the world has ever had any experience of. Theology avails nothing here; it is a human invention....We shall have to take the words of witnesses to the fact, and we shall have to depend on our own spiritual insight to confirm them.” Harris is working out his own theological summation, and for one who claims to be a theological *ingénue*, he deftly conforms a Protestant emphasis on inner authenticity to the Catholic concept of mystery.

The essay ends rather weakly on a non sequitur. Keeping with the preoccupations of the gilded age, Harris takes the robber barons to task for good old-fashioned greed. Yet he is too self-aware as an editor—he was a stickler for “diction,” something of a hobbyhorse—to ignore his own clichés and the sententious slant of the piece. “These statements are platitudes, of course, but it is well, once in a while, to shake a live and wriggling platitude in the face of the public, if only to reassure some of the hopeless ones that God is in His world, and that all is well.” The allusion to “Pippa Passes” brought fitting closure to an essay, and a life, devoted to a consciously elected, stiff-upper-lip optimism that was far from naïve. Harris had seen his portion of adversity and struggled to keep the shadows of depression at

bay. The support of his family, and the sustenance of an unobtrusive spirituality, undoubtedly aided him.

Bruce Bickley divines the essence of Harris's life work wonderfully, but along a different line. "His humorous sensibility left American literature with one of its most important legacies in the comic imagination, and it also gave Harris's contradictory and anxiety-filled life the only wholeness he would ever know." In that respect, the fullness of faith might also be an under-appreciated instrument of Harris's fragile peace.

* * *

Irish characters are understandably rare in *Uncle Remus's Magazine*, which held to its motto, "Typical of the South, National in Scope." Perhaps because it was "national in scope," it atypically picked up a sentimental bit of fluff by Virginia Woodward Cloud. "The Other Man" is a pedestrian if rather confused sampler of syrupy Irish themes. It is only notable because it represents, to my knowledge, the only time during Harris's editorship that he selected fiction set in Ireland with Irish themes.



Illustration 28. Irish illustration by Maud Thurston from *Uncle Remus Magazine*.

As to his own writing, Harris makes some mention of the Irish. In a letter to Lillian, he writes of one Mr. Benson, "one of the most delightful men I ever met. His brogue is as rich as cream, and delicate as a faint whiff of the shamrock bloom."⁸⁴ Harris's Savannah beat probably allowed him some exposure to the Irish community there, and a complete examination of his columns might yet reveal columns on Irish subject matter (although this

will be difficult, inasmuch as many of Harris's columns were unattributed). As it stands, I know of only one, a *Morning News* column from March 11, 1873, where he reported the "most cold-blooded and heartless murder" of an Irishman. The victim, "known as 'Fred,'" was a boatman, shot in his sleep by his employer.

Perhaps his experiences there endowed him with a sense of the Irish nexus in the South. In "Why the Confederacy Failed," a chapter of *On the Wing of Occasions* (1900), he introduces an Irish menial who is also a Confederate sympathizer. The incident unfolds in a New York hotel. A southerner who chats with the Irishman is pressed to take his regards to James Nagle, in these terms: "The Third Georgia is Colonel Nisbet's rigment; 'tis in Ranse Wright's brigade. To be sure, I know 'em well, sir. Should ye be goin' to Augusty, an' chance to see James Nagle, kindly tell 'im ye've seen Terence an' he's doin' well. He's me father, sir, an' he thinks I'm in Elmiry prison." Terrence garrulously relates the saga of his escape with the help of "Father Rafferty," his co-conspirator. The tale elicits chuckles from Fluornoy, the southern spy, who "laughed, though he would have found it difficult to explain why. The reason doubtless was that such boldness and simplicity seemed so foreign to our complex civilization that they stuck the note of incongruity." The reader may also be at a loss for laughter, since Harris seems to be scraping for a few automatic smiles. Moreover, "There was no doubt of Terence Nagle's enthusiastic loyalty to his employer." Given Harris's modus operandi, one suspects that Terence is being transfigured into a surrogate faithful black retainer.

Terence regales his patrons with "many anecdotes of his own experience in the Confederate Army and in prison," and they realize that they have many acquaintances in common before he ducks out. He returns, sans "evening dress, the badge of his position,"

whereupon “he was now himself, the educated Irishman, a fine specimen of a class that can be matched in few of the nations of the earth.” He is, in any event, a thoughtful one, and serendipitously treats his guests to Christmas eggnog. McCarthy, his superior, falls into praising his man effusively.

More Irish, it turns out, are involved in an elaborate stratagem to smuggle information about Sherman’s movements out of the city. Irish cops are in on the act, and their role is to whisk Fluornoy from a crowd. In their zeal to appear believable, they deliver a thrashing to him, with dramatic flourish: “Be aisy, or I’ll twist yure dommed neck, ye dribblin’ idjit!” Dispersing the crowd, the heavy-handed cops chant, “cheese it an’ move on, ivery livin’ sowl av ye!” The whole episode sets up, quite transparently, an opportunity for Keystone Cops slapstick. Terence Nagle has a cameo in “The Whims of Captain McCarthy,” the last story in the collection. An Irish cabman notifies him to put the place in order for “Captain Mack’s” return. Their dialogue is the standard fare of Irish dialect literature (salted with “B’ gobs” and “ye”s), with a few slips into Harris’s more practiced poor white dialect. It is not Harris’s best writing, but it shows his ear for dialect of all types, and his familiarity with the conventions of stage Irish and the stock Paddy characters of northern media. What it does not show is a special affinity for the Irish, or a predisposition for depicting them as fully fleshed characters. The self-described “accidental writer” approaches the Irish quite accidentally.

Before Terence came an Irish Union sharpshooter named Private O’Halloran, who stands at the center of “The Comedy of War,” in *Tales of the Home Folks in Peace and War* (1898). This “big, laughing Irishman liked his pipe, especially when it was full of tobacco.” The start of the chapter finds him slacking off duty, singing and relaxing on his watch. He has been absorbed in picking off a Confederate sharpshooter for some time in an extended

match of cat-and-mouse, and the routine has grown so familiar that he casually jerks his visiting officer from the path of a Reb bullet. "'Tis an old friend of mine, sor...I know 'im by his handwritin'." The gentle, rascally giant, is very tall "with Samson-like arms" and "a large spark of humor glistening in his fine black eyes." He is apparently good-hearted, too. We learn that he spared a boy Confederate from Union bayonets and gave him quarter on his side.

After arranging a truce with the Confederates to do some grocery-swapping, he avails himself of good southern tobacco. "Take all the tay and coffee, you bloody booger," he says to "Happy Jack" Kilpatrick, his Confederate deadeye foil, "Just give me a pipeful of the weed." To which Kilpatrick replies, "Take the darned tobacco, you redmouthed Mickey!" Always the red.

More capers ensue in a scene of doubling that follows. A slave named Tuck encounters the Irishman, who draws a line in the sand between himself and Kilpatrick. O'Halloran explains to Tuck that he is free on the one side of it, but not the other. Of course, the comedy of the scene is complete only if one sees the Irishman and the slave as equals. The incredulous slave decides to see how freedom "feels" by stepping over, and calls back to his young master, who waves him off. Tuck asks him not to tell "mistiss dat I been free, kaze she'll take a bresh-broom an' run me off'n de place when I go back home." Later, O'Halloran's Captain Famrough sees his family, still holding out in their home nearby. Per the formula, his sister Julia announces her love for a Confederate officer just as news of Lee's surrender arrives.

O'Halloran later strikes up an unlikely friendship with his one-time enemy, whom he had described earlier as "a red-headed flannel-mouthed Irishman." When he spots Kilpatrick

on the field, he holds fire, declaring, “Tis the young Johnny, or Oi’m a naygur!” (Although the story presses the conclusion that O’Halloran is indeed, on a symbolic level, a black man). Shaken that he had nearly shot the man, the accidental poet “drew a long breath. ‘Oi was in wan of tetchin’ the traygur.”

Others of O’Halloran’s countrymen have no such hesitation. Kilpatrick is shot down in the battle of Atlanta by a nameless marksman whom O’Halloran later calls a “blackguard.” By the good offices of his retainer, Plato, the wounded man is taken home for nursing. Not only does O’Halloran track him down, but he obtains a skilled surgeon for his new friend by feigning wounds. There is another doubling, this time of plot: the Yankee surgeon is smitten by Kilpatrick’s sister, Flora, and later marries her. In all this, the Irishman seems to be as much an agent of good as a jester. He is clearly a transposition, a kind of goodhearted buck Irishman. The story leaves little doubt that Harris put the Irish on a close footing with slaves in the social hierarchy, and that he was favorably disposed to the Irish.



"GOD BLESS YOU, ME B'Y!"



Illustration 29. O'Halloran; two views, from Harris's *Tales of Home Folks*.⁸⁵

Harris was probably influenced by Samuel McClure, the Irish immigrant who made his name with *McClure's Magazine*. After running "A Comedy of the War," he wrote Harris to ask for more Irish shenanigans stories, which played well to northern readers. "Did not that Irishman, O'Halloran, have any other adventures?" he asked. "It seems to me he is too good to waste on one short story. Cannot you give me four or five short stories like 'The Comedy of War'? If you could have the same character in the heart of the stories, or as a central figure, it would make a capital book, and we could publish it, giving you a good royalty...."⁸⁶

Harris obliged him with only one other O'Halloran chapter ("The Ambuscade"). Otherwise, the most promisingly Irish character in Harris's menagerie is the irrepressible Billy Sanders of Shady Cove. However, any sense of Billy's Irishness—at least, in the sense of "Irish American"—must remain impressionistic. Harris can scarcely conceal his pleasure in taking Billy's voice. He frequently injected folk wisdom into his articles and correspondence, sometimes with the apologetic, "As we say in Georgia." Billy gave him the occasion to say what was said so colorfully in Georgia. The character indulged the writer in his favorite colloquialisms, and let him gather in the frontier wisdom of the rugged middle Georgians. So near and dear was Billy that he soon become another alter-ego, whose natural ease might compensate the writer's lack of self-assurance.

But Billy's analogs were more than likely from the Scots-Irish people of the region, and there is nothing to suggest blurring Catholic Irish into his type, who is eminently a product of his environment. Of his fictional lineage, we know only that "he was supposed to be a grandson of Georgia's Revolutionary heroine, Nancy Hart."⁸⁷ Julia Cooper Harris wrote that Harris loved the mountain folk, advancing that "some of his best work deals with the

lives of the primitive people of pure Anglo-Saxon blood,” a needlessly defensive, if formulaic, notion.⁸⁸ Ultimately, Billy Sanders’s upended and brilliantly imaginative flights of speech, his peculiar logic, and his gadfly gabbiness are his most stereotypically “Irish” qualities.

They were also Joel Chandler Harris’s most “Irish” features. When asked what “gift of nature” he would most like to have, he returned, “the gift of gab.” (O’Halloran says of a slave at one point, “Listen at the gab av ’im!”) Clearly, he did have the gift, but there was nothing particularly Irish about it. Harris did not come to the Catholic fold by his ethnicity, although he might have been moved by a sense of his otherness.

The spirits of conformity and rebellion wrestled for supremacy in Harris, too. Bertram Wyatt-Brown has argued that Harris was himself a trickster, who both cottoned to and resented white hierarchy. By making him the son of an Irishman, the last trick was played on him. That we still understand so little of who Harris was and where he came from invites further investigation. One might be tempted by the delicious possibility that “Irish” was a front for racial “impurity” in Harris’s lineage. The intrigue is heightened by the weird imagination of the psychically anguished scene in “Where’s Duncan?,” where a mixed bastard boy sees his revenge perfected in his father’s murder. We have a tantalizing hint of it in Mary Fielder’s journal entry, which mentions that he “[had] not only poverty to contend with, but other things.”⁸⁹ Harris himself validated the notion when he wrote in 1870, “My history is a peculiarly sad and unfortunate one.”

But the statements hardly pass forensic muster. They should be considered within the most innocent, and hence skeptical, contexts. Fielder may have simply referred to the boy’s taboo bastardy with Victorian delicacy. The notion that Harris came of mixed racial stock

remains more grounded in irresponsible speculation than proof. It is far safer to say that the “Irish” ascription, and the southern public’s willingness to accept it, bears witness to the fact that he remained a southern outsider.

However, the point stands that the conventional narrative of Harris’s life is perhaps too staid and inert. Harris’s biographies, in general, show their age, and the cracks from the settling run to the foundation, beginning with his date of birth and stated father. The time is nigh for an exhumation—not of his bones (although the option has been suggested as a means of settling his parentage, genetically, once and for all!), but of his work and biography, and particularly, his relationship with his wife. The question of his invented Irishness is most instructive for what it says about the reputation of the Irish in the South. It is appealing to think that Joe Harris’s extraordinary empathy, as well as his rare lapses into mean conformity, came from being something less than fully white in the eyes of his society. And that is precisely what I mean to suggest of this southern Irish writer who wasn’t.

Notes

- ¹ The phrase is not exclusively southern.
- ² Letter to the author, 6 April 2004.
- ³ Julia Collier Harris and Katherine H. Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1918) 7.
- ⁴ Kenneth H. Thomas, Jr., "Roots and Environment: The Family Background of Joel Chandler Harris," Atlanta Historical Journal 30.Fall-Winter (1986-87): 45-46.
- ⁵ Thomas, "Roots and Environment: The Family Background of Joel Chandler Harris," 40.
- ⁶ Thomas's article intrepidly documents the many fascinating twists and turns of the whole intrigue with an investigator's unshakable energy. A likely candidate has recently come to the fore, but that is another story, not to be told here.
- ⁷ Kenny, "Father Ryan's Poems."
- ⁸ At the Library of Virginia in Richmond.
- ⁹ Verot, General Catechism of the Christian Doctrine on the Basis Adopted by the Plenary Council of Baltimore. For the Use of Catholics of the Diocese of Savannah & Vicariate Apostolic of Florida, with Slight Additions and Modifications 58.
- ¹⁰ Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White 41.
- ¹¹ J. Vance Lewis and John Hope Franklin Collection of African and African-American Documentation., Out of the Ditch; a True Story of an Ex-Slave (Houston (Tex.): Rein & Sons Co., 1910).
- ¹² Some Melungeons would hotly dispute that contention. For a delightful summary of the South's "little races," refer to John Shelton Reed, "Mixing in the Mountains," Southern Culture 3.4 (1997).
- ¹³ David O'Connell, The Irish Roots of Margaret Mitchell's Gone with the Wind (Decatur, Ga.: Claves and Petry, 1996) 19.
- ¹⁴ McWhiney's argument—that the Catholic Irish, Welsh, Cornish, and various Scots, emerge from the same essential culture—allows him to credit Celtic peoples as the architects of southern culture. But, as Irish historian Kenneth Kenny points out, "A new theory of racial essentialism is surely the last things the American South needs at this point in its history." Cf., Kevin Kenny, The American Irish : A History (Harlow, England: Longman, 2000) 42-3.

- ¹⁵ Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White 41.
- ¹⁶ Paul M. Cousins, Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1968) 26.
- ¹⁷ Robert Bain, Joseph M. Flora and Louis Decimus Rubin, Southern Writers : A Biographical Dictionary, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1979) 208.
- ¹⁸ Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 183.
- ¹⁹ Cousins, Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography 78.
- ²⁰ Cousins, Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography 217.
- ²¹ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 154.
- ²² Joel Chandler Harris, Gabriel Tolliver : A Story of Reconstruction (New York: McClure Phillips & Co., 1902) 352.
- ²³ This misunderstanding was at least partly semantic. Cable used the nuanced meanings of the term “Creole”—sometimes a patois, and sometimes a designation of colonial ancestry, etc.—to the confusion of his readership. This misconception has endured in some quarters.
- ²⁴ Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 121.
- ²⁵ Quoted in Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War 575.
- ²⁶ Joel Chandler Harris, "Anne Macfarland Review," Uncle Remus's Magazine I.9 (1908): 20-21.
- ²⁷ It makes strange kin to a complaint registered by Joseph Addison Turner, Harris's mentor: "As an editor, I was once bold as a lion. That was when I had a country. Now, it seems, I have none...I will write upon no subject upon which I cannot freely speak my mind." For Turner, and perversely, for Cable, it was Union victory that had made the South unfree.
- ²⁸ Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition 159.
- ²⁹ Writing as Anne MacFarland in *Uncle Remus Magazine*; reprinted in Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 571.. Cable saw the Lost Cause as a front. The self-declared policy of “masterly inactivity” he marked as a vindictive means of stalling. His primary offense was daring to suggest that the South would have to move

beyond old ways if it were to move forward. He pursued egalitarian arguments to their logical ends. "I made it my private maxim," he declared: "There is no room in America for a peasantry." He had flirted with southern conformity, but there was still something of Yankee republicanism in him.

- ³⁰ Cf., "Religion," in J. R. LeMaster, James D. Wilson and Christie Graves Hamric, The Mark Twain Encyclopedia, Garland Reference Library of the Humanities ; V. 1249 (New York: Garland Pub., 1993).
- ³¹ Ignatiev, How the Irish Became White 89.
- ³² Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 302.
- ³³ Joel Chandler Harris, The Chronicles of Aunt Minervy Ann (Charles Scribner's Sons, 1899).
- ³⁴ For a complete account of this incident, refer to the first chapter of Philip Dray, At the Hands of Persons Unknown : The Lynching of Black America, 1st ed. (New York: Random House, 2002).
- ³⁵ William L. Andrews and Charles Waddell Chesnutt, The Literary Career of Charles W. Chestnutt, Southern Literary Studies (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1980), Jack Wheat, "Uncle Remus' Century as a Cultural Bellwether," Herald September 24 1995.
- ³⁶ As quoted in Tynes Cowan, "Charles Waddell Chesnutt and Joel Chandler Harris: An Anxiety of Influence," Resources for American Literary Study 25.2 (1999): 234.
- ³⁷ Florence E. Baer, Sources and Analogues of the Uncle Remus Tales (Helsinki: Suomalainen Tiedeakatemia, 1980).
- ³⁸ R. Bruce Bickley, Joel Chandler Harris, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1978) 65.
- ³⁹ Letter to Ashley Brown, 26 May 1958.
- ⁴⁰ From the Georgia Historical Society.
- ⁴¹ Joel Chandler Harris, John T. Bickley and R. Bruce Bickley, Nights with Uncle Remus : Myths and Legends of the Old Plantation, Penguin Classics (New York: Penguin Books, 2003) 129.
- ⁴² Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition 167.

- ⁴³ "Literature in the South," editorial of November 30, 1879. Quoted in Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 83.
- ⁴⁴ Summarized in Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition 159.
- ⁴⁵ Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 114.
- ⁴⁶ Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 117.
- ⁴⁷ As printed in "The Critic"; reprinted in Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 569.
- ⁴⁸ Brasch, Brer Rabbit, Uncle Remus, and the "Cornfield Journalist" : The Tale of Joel Chandler Harris 121-2. It was Harris's habit not to capitalize "negro," "white," etc.
- ⁴⁹ "Negro Customs" in *The Youth's Companion* 11 June 1885, 238.
- ⁵⁰ Joel Chandler Harris and Richard Hooker Wilmer, The Shadow between His Shoulder-Blades (Boston: Small Maynard and Company, 1909) 11-12, 132.
- ⁵¹ Joel Chandler Harris, Balaam and His Master, and Other Sketches and Stories, Short Story Index Reprint Series (Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries Press, 1969) 169.
- ⁵² From Uncle Remus's Magazine.
- ⁵³ Late Nov. 1897 (undated) p. 153
- ⁵⁴ Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition 163.
- ⁵⁵ Thomas, "Roots and Environment: The Family Background of Joel Chandler Harris," 41.
- ⁵⁶ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 272.
- ⁵⁷ Cf., Chapter 31, "Mr. Sanders Receives a Message," Harris, Gabriel Tolliver : A Story of Reconstruction.
- ⁵⁸ Harris, Gabriel Tolliver : A Story of Reconstruction 341.
- ⁵⁹ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 582.
- ⁶⁰ Charles George Herbermann, Edward A. Pace, Condé Benoist Pallen, Thomas J. Shahan, John J. Wynne and Andrew Alphonsus MacErlean, The Catholic Encyclopedia : An

International Work of Reference on the Constitution, Doctrine, Discipline, and History of the Catholic Church (New York: Caxton Pub. Co.; R. Appleton Co., 1907).

⁶¹ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 581.

⁶² Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris.

⁶³ To Mildred, June 1901.

⁶⁴ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 588.

⁶⁵ Letter to the author, 15 Apr 2004

⁶⁶ To Julian Harris, 10 February 1891. In Joel Chandler Harris and Hugh T. Keenan, Dearest Chums and Partners : Joel Chandler Harris's Letters to His Children : A Domestic Biography (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1993) 33.

⁶⁷ Cousins, Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography 85.

⁶⁸ Harris and Keenan, Dearest Chums and Partners : Joel Chandler Harris's Letters to His Children : A Domestic Biography xxx.

⁶⁹ 4 Apr. 1897

⁷⁰ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 261.

⁷¹ 2 May 1897

⁷² 25 Oct. 1896

⁷³ 15 Nov. 1896

⁷⁴ 2 May 1897

⁷⁵ 30 May 1897

⁷⁶ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 576.

⁷⁷ 14 and 21 Feb 1897. In reference to a botched cavity repair that left him in dangerous sepsis, Harris wrote, "Another twelve hours of gas manufacture, and my head would have become a balloon, and the community would have witnessed the phenomenon of a fat man floating through the air supported by his gaseous head. That would have been a spectacle for the population to gaze upon and talk about."

⁷⁸ 25 Oct. 1896

⁷⁹ Cousins, Joel Chandler Harris: A Biography 78.

⁸⁰ 10 Jan. 1897

⁸¹ 27 Mar. 1898

⁸² 25 Apr. 1897

⁸³ July 1908.

⁸⁴ 15 Jun. 1897

⁸⁵ Notice simian features, and his priestly posture.

⁸⁶ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 398.

⁸⁷ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 430.

⁸⁸ Harris and Wootten, The Life and Letters of Joel Chandler Harris 218.

⁸⁹ Thomas, "Roots and Environment: The Family Background of Joel Chandler Harris," 41.

CHAPTER IV

The Peculiar Genius of Lafcadio Hearn, The Man Who Wrote New Orleans

Si quieres aprender á orar, entra en el mar (If thou wouldst learn to pray, go to the sea).—
Proverb quoted in Lafcadio Hearn's *Chita*

No forcing the sea.—Irish proverb

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Take your pick: Patricio “Patrick” Lafcadio Tessima Carlos Hearn was an Irishman, a displaced Greek, a citizen of Japan, a vagabond midwesterner, a loyal southerner, a citizen of the Catholic pangaea (sometimes despite himself), or a multinational meridional connoisseur. Any of them would be correct. From this complex of identities emerged a complicated writer, and perhaps it is because of the difficulty of understanding who Hearn was, and Hearn’s own quest for self-identity, that he fell for a time into benign neglect.

That is changing, as scholars have come to appreciate Hearn’s singular importance as a writer who straddles colonial and post-colonial genres. Indeed, Hearn’s work joined the two. Scholars of southern literature will find Hearn’s New Orleans writings especially attractive. His grisly preoccupations reveal the full range of latent tensions between Catholic/Protestant ideologies. With mad irreverence, he invented gonzo journalism almost a century before it would be so-named—cross-dressing, experimenting with drugs, and racially passing to get his stories. The French-influenced realism of some of his journalistic sketches

places them among the finest ever written about the south. Jefferson Humphries submits, “It makes more sense to say that Hearn offers a noble example to all those newspaper feature writers who have literary aspirations than to say that Hearn was himself a journalist.”¹ And perhaps more than any other writer, Hearn taught southerners and Americans how to *see* New Orleans; the mythos that he created remains the dominant paradigm for approaching a place steeped in Catholic mystery. For that achievement alone, he deserves renewed attention and profound respect.

But he has also earned the gratitude of folklorists and anthropologists for writing about the forgotten classes: he was a pioneer of what is now called multiculturalism, and his work powerfully interrupts WASP’s nest assumptions about the South’s cultural homogeneity. His fascination with the exotic compelled him to compile treasuries of the south’s little cultures and “little races,” supplying a thin record with much needed, almost voluptuous detail. Hearn left an account of popular black folk songs, for instance, that remains a kind of *ur*-list for folklorists; he also recorded slave narratives, firsthand observations on minstrel shows, drug addiction, roustabout life, and marvels too numerous to enumerate. His novel *Chita* (1889) has been rightly called a lost classic. Without him, the literary vision of the nineteenth century South would lose a good deal of color, and the fund of New Orleans lore would be greatly reduced.

Most students of Hearn today come to him by way of post-colonial interest. Ironically, a man who could not claim a place during his life has been subjected to the *réclame* of Japanese, Americans, and Irish alike. When Mary Robinson was president of Ireland she beamed to a Japanese audience (which included Hearn’s grandson) at Shimane Prefecture, “That he was Irish is a great source of pride to me.”² Hearn scholarship has

thrived in Japan, where he is acknowledged as a kind of folk hero whose empathetic “double perspective” on East and West was unusually clear-sighted.

But he was an accidental Irishman; to the Japanese, “almost” Japanese; and a seeker to all who knew him. The unsettled circumstances of his birth befitted a life fraught with gothic preoccupations. At age thirty, Charles Bush Hearn, a surgeon/officer stationed with British Army Medical Staff on the Ionian Islands, took a liking to a beautiful and reputationally unstable islander named Rosa Cassimati (sometimes given as Kassimati). Pregnancy preceded marriage, and a son, George Robert Hearn, was born out of wedlock in 1849. Charles Hearn eventually married Rosa, but apparently without a very willing heart. He treated his wife as a mistress, and kept quiet about the marriage for fear that it might be an impediment to his military career. Charles Hearn’s mother considered the whole affair an ensnarement and beneath his dignity.

Apocryphally, Lafcadio Hearn’s mother may have been abusive, suicidal, and a religious visionary. These rumors are probably overstated, or at the least, should be regarded cautiously, since evidences of mental illness, then as now, were a means to an end. Eventually, Rosa Cassimati did wind up in the asylum.

She had plenty to drive her there. Her first child by Hearn died just before his first birthday, and she quite naturally invested herself in her newly born son. A series of misunderstandings unfolded when she went to stay with her in-laws in Dublin: Rosa’s siestas were taken for a sign of sloth, her unfettered emotions were interpreted as childish simplicity, and her regionally-accented Greek proved unintelligible to an interpreter. One can imagine the Greek woman arriving on quite another island, where tea was the only cure for cheerless, cold, and wet days. Most disastrously, Rosa’s “superstitious” practice of

Orthodox Catholicism connected her to the Irish peasantry and seemed monstrous to her staid Protestant hosts. The Hearn came of English stock and had settled in Ireland in the seventeenth century. They called the boy Patrick; she called him Lafcadio. Rosa's mother-in-law was quite convinced that the Greek woman would not do.

The deracinated mother could see that her earring-wearing, tea-skinned son (whom she dressed in a "Greek-style cap with long velvet tail")³ would not be welcome among his father's family, and she was right. She spent most of her time with Charles Hearn's sympathetic sixty-year old aunt. Sarah Holmes Brenane had become the black sheep of the family by marrying a Catholic and becoming a Catholic devout. Charles William Kent, an English professor from the University of Virginia who was the literary editor of the *Library of Southern Literature* (Joel Chandler Harris was an editor-in-chief), wrote of "Mrs. Brenans," "[She] was a convert to the Roman Catholic Church and was extremely bigoted, being surrounded by fawning priests and converted *protégés*."⁴ Harris must not have edited that particular chapter, which reveals more of the editor's bigotry than Sarah Brenane's.

In any event, over a year elapsed before Charles Hearn came to Dublin to play at family normalcy. The usual stresses of military existence were brought to bear on the strained family; the couple argued constantly, and Hearn gratefully accepted assignment to the horrific Crimean War. Meanwhile, the rejected mother decided to return to her own people. Sarah Brenane accepted the boy as her charge and arranged passage for Rosa, who was understandably beset by depression. As it turned out, Charles had impregnated her yet again, and a midwife accompanied her on the voyage. Daniel James Hearn, who would become Lafcadio's long-lost brother, was probably born en route.

Two years later Rosa would receive word that Charles had secured an annulment on a technicality: the illiterate woman had not been a signatory to the marital contract. The marriage was invalid in the eyes of a British court. When she went back to Dublin to see Lafcadio, the family refused to reveal his whereabouts; Charles Hearn married a childhood sweetheart whose husband had recently died. Rosa decided to remarry when she returned, this time, to a Greek man, but it was stipulated that she give up her sons by previous marriages. James was sent back to Dublin, and Sarah Brenane accepted final custody of Lafcadio.

The *extremis*, sense of loss, and shame that this must have occasioned can scarcely be imagined. Lafcadio considered his mother a “divine.” She was the Madonna of the icon she had left him, one of the only tokens of his mother that remained to him. He saw her for the last time at the age of four. “But I fancied that the brown Virgin represented my mother—whom I had almost completely forgotten—and the large-eyed Child, myself.” The boy bore the psychological wounds. He was terrified of ghosts and “saw them everywhere.”⁵ “I had been taught to pronounce the invocation, *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.*” There was “unspeakable awfulness in the capital G. Even now the aspect of that formidable letter,” Lafcadio wrote, “will sometimes revive those dim and fearsome imaginings of childhood.” The boy was already Christ-haunted, to use Flannery O’Connor’s term—and as O’Connor recognized, “Ghosts can be very fierce and instructive.”⁶ He partook of the same neurosis as the writer he most admired. Traveling with his uncle through Virginia, six-year-old Edgar Allan Poe espied a gloomy family cemetery, and shrieked inconsolably of ghosts, “They will run after us and drag me down.”⁷

Notwithstanding the scars of childhood, when he was sentient enough to do so, Hearn chose the Greek. Patrick Lafcadio Hearn went by Lafcadio. As it was with Abram Ryan, he chose his identity in picking his name. He believed he might have two souls: “one sensitive and impulsive like his Greek mother and the other proud and stubborn like his Anglo-Irish father.”⁸ As to his father, he said, “The soul of me is not of him.”⁹ He attributed all that was best in him to this Greek aspect. Electing “Mediterranean” and “classical” might be expected from so romantic a soul. It is akin to the American youth who learns of Native American blood in his family, and chooses to identify with the comparatively exotic culture in defiance of generic suburban desuetude. The attribution was fittingly romantic, couched in terms of otherness and Orientalism: “Whatever there is good in me,” he confided in his brother, “came from that dark race-soul of which we know so little. My love of right, my hate of wrong;—my admiration for what is beautiful or true;—my capacity for faith in man or woman;—my sensitiveness to artistic things which give me whatever *little success I have*;—even that language power whose physical sign is in the large eyes of both of us,—came from Her.”¹⁰ Something of Hearn’s Catholic training lurks here. Sacraments are conventionally understood as “an outward sign of an inward presence”; the “physical sign” has a rich register within the tradition. Moreover, Hearn always spoke of his mother’s large, dark eyes, and they held a mysterious significance for him that approached the gaze of the Byzantine Christ. The boy learned to venerate Mary and his own mother. It is certainly significant, not to mention heart-rending, that he vested so much in a mother he scarcely knew. He concluded, “It is the mother who makes us,—makes at least all that makes the nobler man: not his strength or power of calculation, but his heart and power to love.”

Lafcadio came of age when the Catholic Church was rethinking the status of Mary-Mother-of-God. By methods both informal and ecclesiastical, the Church moved Mary front-and-center and declared veneration appropriate, capitalizing on the ambient “Angel of the Hearth” sentiment so important to the developing, if highly circumscribed, domestic sphere. In other words, adoration of Mary (termed Mariolatry by disapproving Protestants who were quick to point out the pagan roots of woman-worship) played nicely to the ascendant forms of Victorian gynolatry. Kate Chopin wore a special medallion on her belt, the badge of her membership in the select Children of Mary, one of the many charitable/religious organizations devoted to the Virgin that blossomed during the period. (It was expected that she would join a Marian sodality in her adult life and carry out charitable work, but she gave only her financial backing.) Father Ryan was likewise heavily invested in Marian charities and frequented lectured expressly to promote them. Hearn would allow that even the “rough and fierce” Norsemen “recognized in the woman the divine Creator and worshiped her with a blind devotion and a noble idolatry which gave to another age the Spirit of Chivlary.”¹¹

Some of Lafcadio’s mother-fixation may well have stemmed from his latent Catholic upbringing. And some of it amounted to little more than an intellectual construction coupled with his sense of potentiality. His power to love, by most accounts, was quite limited, because he was quick to take umbrage at perceived slights, however minor. He was extremely mercurial and conflicted on matters of race, religion, and gender. Thus he could marry a mulatto and become a racial paternalist who declaimed “the greatest error of slavery was that which resulted in the creation of the mixed races”;¹² write a passionate editorial calling for laws to protect women from abuse while heaping mental abuse on women who fancied him; decry the various religions that he earnestly explored; and reinvent himself as a

Japanese man, hampered, to his consternation, by a distinctly Western nose! Childhood presented him with a wardrobe of conflicted identities and he spent the rest of life trying to find clothes that fit.

For the time being, Mrs. Brenane dressed him, insisting upon the most Catholic education possible. She obtained the best tutors for him. His interests inclined to the mythologies in the household library. Charles William Kent glosses the episode prejudicially: “His pious protectress, realizing his extraordinary devotion to ‘pagan gods,’ had him put under religious tutelage. Catechism and confession took the place of his beloved deities, and from even that early period he cherished his resentment against Romanism.”¹³ Kent’s rather imaginative interpretation reveals something of the anti-Catholic bias among academics of the day.

It is true that Lafcadio Hearn recalled the classical library as his “greatest find,” and wrote of it, “Something seemed to be thrilling out of those pictured pages,—something invisible that made me afraid. I remembered stories of the infernal magic that informed the work of the pagan statuary. But this superstitious fear presently yielded to a conviction, or rather intuition—which I could not possibly have explained—that the gods had been belied *because they were beautiful*.”¹⁴

It was a perfectly plausible explanation for the selective Victorian fascination with the classical past. His guardians, impelled by Victorian mores and Irish Catholic prudery, censored the texts, erasing “parts of many figures,” slashing out the breasts of one figure, and, rather ineffectually, inserting “*drawers*” (Hearn’s emphasis) on some of them—“large, baggy bathing-drawers, woven with cross-strokes of a quill-pen, so designed as to conceal all curves of beauty—especially the long fine thighs.... However, in my case, this barbarism

proved of some educational value. It furnished me with many problems of restoration; and I often tried very hard to reproduce in pencil-drawing the obliterated or the hidden line.”¹⁵

This might explain how it came to pass, many years later, that a friend would find the desperately nearsighted Hearn scrutinizing a prostitute, “she naked in the middle of the floor, he walking around and around her, his one eye six inches from her, admiring her fine lines.”¹⁶ The gaze-object in this instance was a woman of color, and on hearing the anecdote related, Elizabeth Bisland, one of Lafcadio’s friends and crushes, “laughed and said that was reasonable,—it went to prove that Hearn’s interest in Negro women was purely aesthetic.”¹⁷ Hearn’s “fear of the g—coccus,” however, hints at more than artistic intercourse.¹⁸

Ironically, accounts of Hearn’s own life would come to be bowdlerized. During the more sexually audacious portion of his life, Hearn commented to his friend J.E. Krehbiel, a journalist, “I eat and drink and sleep with members of the races you detest...” Elizabeth Bisland, his early biographer, euphemistically changed “sleep” to “converse.” The error was repeated by many who followed.

Aunt Sarah saw the writing on the wall. She gradually despaired of making a priest of Lafcadio, who seemed destined obdurately to become the heathen the family had feared. She sent him to the Institution Ecclésiastique at Yvetot near Rouen. The Petit Séminaire, as it was known to its pupils, was considered to be a regular prison. Guy de Maupassant entered the school shortly after Hearn left and detested it equally; he wrote that it “smelled of prayers the way a fish market smells of fish.” Regardless, Lafcadio learned French well during his time there. After a year he matriculated at Saint Cuthbert’s College, Ushaw, in County Durham, England. His best friend there was an Irish boy, imponderably named Achilles Daunt; Lafcadio reduced his profile by going by “Paddy.” He tested his priest-tutors once

again, asking impertinent question about the Divine Writ and confessing amorous fantasies of temptresses. His teachers found him both eccentric and impossible, but they acknowledged his excellence in English composition. (The lad purportedly grew one of his fingernails long, and clipped it into a quill for writing; he was poised to become an ink-stained wretch.) Even at that age, he shared many affinities with Kate Chopin. Like her, he was something of a religious school wag, educated partly in French, partly under the ministries of Irish Catholics.

It was at school in England where Lafcadio, who was already so myopic that he could not read texts unless they were a few inches away from his face, suffered an injury that cost him one of his eyes. He was already morbidly sensitive about his appearance. Fully grown, he stood just five feet, three inches. He caricatured himself as a myope, in one doodle, as a snail with one enormous antenna-eye. The windows to the soul became a subject of endless fascination for him, and he waxed on for pages about them in correspondence. Like most who lived in his age, he lived under the spell of physiognomic “science,” countenanced such a thing as “Irish features,” and believed that the differences between black and white voices could be explained by the vocal chords. His deficient vision no doubt influenced him in writing copiously about odors, music, and speech.

Thus Hearn bore all the baggage that makes a writer: he was abandoned early in life by *both* parents. He lived on the margins of social acceptability with an outsider’s keen insight into cultural norms. He was acutely shy and swaggered only in print. And he bore a visible wound, a sense-limiting physical handicap, for which, as Edmund Wilson might submit, his art attempted to compensate.

His first chance to ply that art was soon to come. At eighteen, he was recuperating from his eye surgery and living as a boarder in London's East End. He was young, listless, and intensely curious. He frequented unseemly places and faced what he colorfully termed "the wolf's side of life, the ravening side, the apish side; the ugly facets of the monkey puzzle."¹⁹ Henry Molyneux, who was something of a financial schemer, had advised Lafcadio's Aunt Sarah on a bad scheme, and the young man's college fun evaporated. So Molyneux called him in, pressed a steamer ticket in his hand, and sent him off to Cincinnati.

* * *

Hearn never could get a break. The relations that Molyneux had promised would look after him upon his arrival promptly turned him out. A printer named Henry Watkin took the penniless lad under his wing and exposed him to "hosts of fantastic heterodoxies." Watkin was indeed a strange bird; he was interested in some of the balmy forms of utopian communalism. His unconventional views were rooted in Deism and atheism, but, with pseudo-scientific zeal, he also propounded polygamy, Charles Fourier's "phalansteries," the Freethinkers (whose philosophy Kate Chopin would also get to know), and the Perfectionists of John Humphrey Noyes's Oneida Community.

Lafcadio Hearn was already unconventional; he was probably still impressionable. And he was certainly in need of a father figure. He came to call Watkin "Dad" and "Old Man." In the spring of 1871 he received word that Sarah Brenane had died, naming Molyneux her executor. No mention was made of her promised bequest. Lafcadio received the news coolly. "Everybody who does me a wrong indirectly does me a right," he declared, perhaps not considering the very Christian roots of the sentiment.

Hearn developed his mordant streak, holding forth “about his antagonism toward (as he put it) ‘hypocrite’ priests, ‘goblin nuns in black robes,’ and ‘civilized’ folk who considered themselves so superior to the powerless, the ‘uncouth,’ and the ‘savage’ types of the world.”²⁰ He became a scribe for the Cincinnati Unitarian Church for a time. To some extent, he was what every nineteen year old should be: a rebel in search of a cause. His antipathies were diffuse and abstractly directed toward all centers of power. But for all his radicalism, he still nursed a strong need to be accepted. And this, I will argue, led him to an unsparing conservatism.

As a youth in Cincinnati, though, his mode was wholly exploratory. He made his way into a penny press, a cub reporter in the palmy days of personal journalism. Between 1872 and 1877 he penned at least 400 newspaper articles for *The Cincinnati Enquirer* and *The Cincinnati Commercial*. Hearn did not mesh well in the clubby atmosphere of the newspaper. Other staff reporters, who found him unapproachable—for he was both wary and dangerously insecure—called him “Hearn.” But the police on his beat were familiar enough to call him “Paddy” or “O’Hearn,” and they “occasionally joked with him in Gaelic.”²¹ The new American with a soft Irish accent immersed himself in Cincinnati’s demimonde. He sought out the outcast, the downtrodden, and the condemned almost exclusively. The sensationalism of his reporting from the time led his early biographer George M. Gould to call this his “period of the gruesome.”

Hearn adopted the nickname “the Raven” during these years and he was held deeply in Poe’s thrall. In later years, his fascination with wonder-inspiring “Oriental” subjects, alongside the visceral, mirrors Poe’s arabesque/grotesque dichotomy. He also followed Poe’s “Philosophy of Composition” in choosing New Orleans. He described how his first

sight of Louisiana brought tears to his eyes, likening the place to a “dead bride crowned with Orange flowers,—a dead face that asked for a kiss.”²² He obviously concurred with Poe: there is nothing more poetical than death of a beautiful woman.

A sampler of his headlines from the period, taken from, gives a flavor of horripilating Hearn’s macabre preoccupations:

HACELDAMA. Humanity and inhumanity in the shambles. Hebrew slaughterers, Gentile butchers, and consumptive blood-drinkers.

THE CHARNEL HOUSE. Ghastly groping in the decay of graves.

THE ELIXIR OF LOVE. The tomahawker tries suicide. He searches for the juggler, but failing in that tries an artery. He would die “all for love.”

GOLGOTHA. A Pilgrimage to Potter's Field. The sexton-guardian of nameless graves. His secret alliance with ghouls. Extraordinary facilities afforded to resurrectionists. Grave-robbing gravely winked at.

THE HAUNTED AND THE HAUNTERS. Ghostly minstrelsy in the city stables. A goblin in a gas-pipe.

ASSASSINATION. A woman's throat cut near her own door in a dark alley. She rushes speechless and bleeding into her house and dies.

THE DANCE OF DEATH. Enquirer reporter in a dissecting room. The skeleton of Cunny — odors of the charnel house — student buzzards and stinking stiffs.

GIBBETED. Execution of a youthful murderer. Shocking tragedy at Dayton. A broken rope and a double hanging. Sickening scenes behind the scaffold-screen.

A SLAUGHTER HOUSE STORY. About one who drank three glasses of blood, and went blind.²³

Many of the columns were plainly meretricious, or at least titillating, but Hearn could also be a true crusader. He exposed quack abortionists, charlatan cult leaders, crackpot spiritualists, misguided temperance boosters, and of course, fly-by-night evangelists. Some articles were a blend of exposé and serious social interest. Writing about “the opium habit,” he interviewed many informants, including both druggists and users. Hearn pointedly underscores the fact that while many addicts are of the “demi-mode,” they come from “all classes.” In his startling description of an addict, one sees how little the ills change: the

morphine-abuser employed his needle “to such purpose that the entire surface of the chest and abdomen presented an appearance similar to the lid of a pepper-box.”

In “Gibbeted,” Hearn makes a case against capital punishment that speaks for itself. Nineteen-year-old James Murphy would be recognized as a gang leader today (“the boasted leader of a band of young roughs, from nineteen to twenty years of age, who were known in Dayton as the ‘chain-gang.’”) He was sentenced to hang after he impulsively stabbed Colonel William Dawson, in a drunken attempt to save face, after Dawson brusquely refused to admit him to a wedding celebration. Murphy’s “parents were hard-working Irish people,” but, Hearn notes, ostensibly to heighten the pathos, “his own features showed little evidence of Irish blood.” Hearn observes that those condemned to death frequently attempt suicide “and are for the most part deterred from so doing rather by the religious dread of a dim and vague Something after death, than by physical fear.” On learning that the governor would not commute his sentence, Murphy “listened much more calmly to the admonitions of Father Murphy”—no apparent relation—“a fat, kindly, red-cheeked Irish priest, who took a heartfelt interest in the ‘spiritual welfare’ of his namesake. He soon expressed repentance for his crime....”

The priest does not come off so well in another mention, though, and Hearn’s hard feelings about Church hypocrisies are roused. On the day of the execution, the prisoner “heard mass, listened to Father Murphy’s admonitions, ate a light breakfast, and smoked several cigars. Father Murphy’s admonitions, delivered in simple language, and a strong old-country brogue, seemed to us passive listeners somewhat peculiar, especially when he stated that the ‘flesh and blood of Jesus Christ, which not even the angels were worth to eat,’ would give strength to the poor lad ‘to meet his God at half-past 1 o’clock.’” Hearn moderates this

somewhat by allowing, "If ever religious faith comforted the last moments of a young criminal, it did in this instance; and it was owing to the kindly but powerful efforts of the little priest that the youth made a full public confession of his crime." Which, of course, the newspaper reprinted.

If Hearn occasionally condemned Catholicism, and played the part of a searcher to whom no avenue of experience could be closed, the fact remains that he was quite capable of showing good moral sense. The challenge for Hearn was to humanize his subject in a relatively short space, even after he allowed that the execution was one the county citizens "looked forward to," and that the murder was "atrocious," as it was "committed without the shadow of provocation." Hearn simply excelled at the literary sketch. He describes the "agony" of waiting and submits that "the victim was young and strong, a warm-blooded, passionate boy, with just that coarse animal vitality which makes men cling most strongly to life, as a thing to be enjoyed in the mere face of possession—the mere ability to hear, see, feel." He explores each of those senses as he then recounts how the boy's final day "must assuredly have consisted of a strange and confused vision of solemn images and mysterious events." In short, powerful sentences, strung together by his beloved semicolon, he relates the images: "the black gibbet, with its dismal hangings of sable muslin," "Sisters of Charity, in dark robes," and "solemn-faced priests, with snowy Roman collars." The condemned is a double for his priest; he wears "the neat suit of black cloth for which he had been measured a few days before."²⁴

Murphy survived the first attempt to hang him when the rope broke, an occurrence not altogether uncommon. After a second attempt, it took seventeen minutes for James Murphy to die. Hearn summarized, "But the facts in the case, as they appeared to the writer,

were simply that a poor, ignorant passionate boy, with a fair, coarse face”—Hearn had an enduring interest in physiognomy—“had in the heat of drunken anger taken away the life of a fellow-being, and paid the penalty of his brief crime, by a hundred days of mental torture, and a hideous death.”²⁵

Hearn’s sure literary touch can be seen in the details; he refers to Murphy, at several points, as “the victim.” He employs a variety of perspectives, moving easily between them, to sketch the unfortunate fellow, and the result is a piece that is not only far ahead of its time, but unusually “literary” reportage. The piece presages modern journalism, especially when Hearn permits himself to see the execution through the condemned man’s eyes. The incident certainly impressed the young reporter, and it no doubt gave him pause, since he could have easily seen himself in his countryman’s shoes (he reports, for instance, that the boy lost his mother at an early age).

This was not the most shocking of his reportage, though, and certainly not the most graphic. Hearn was for a time quite absorbed with the corruptibility of the body and sought out stories of the macabre wherever he could find them. He once interviewed an anatomist/coroner (“articulator of skeletons”), given as “Dr. B,” and his two child-assistants. Dr. B is a man of unusual trade and still stranger habits. Hearn describes how B routinely keeps vats of macerating human remains in his home, battles maggots without much success, and dissects partially decomposed parts to cobble together skeletons. Naturally, the article ends with the daughter announcing that dinner is ready.

The tomb raider afforded Hearn an opportunity to show off his knowledge of anatomy, gleaned from the doctor’s books that he digested with voraciously indifference. The Irish immigrant had been raised in what Americans liked to call the “foreign faith,” and

under his stock protests, one detects in his writings that he was acclimated to the hands-on experience of mortality. In any event, he was serving the people what they wanted. As Jenny Franchot documents in *Roads to Rome*, Protestant travel writing in the nineteenth century was literally engrossed with Catholic proximity to the dead—and proof of Catholic morbidity. With its fusty catacombs and bone-festooned chapels, Rome in particular provided the evidences of grisly Catholic primitivism. Hearn uncovered his own gothic in innocent Cincinnati. In his bodily obsession is reflected not just the macabre fixations of his cultural moment, but his troubled relationship with mother church. Hearn later advocated cremation, pointing to the unsanitary and revolting decay of New Orleans' catacombs. Yet he made his position more acceptable by citing Catholic devouts who had endorsed the practice.

His coverage of the brutal Tanyard Murder was surpassingly sordid. Murder most foul transpired after an outraged father took revenge on a German laborer named Herman Schilling. Schilling had most likely impregnated his fifteen-year-old daughter, who died seven months into the pregnancy. Some of the *Enquirer* columns cannot be read over breakfast; even today, they are graphically nauseating. Apparently, Hearn could not restrain himself from hands-on participation. He visited the grisly crime scene—in the same filthy slaughterhouse quarter that he described in other articles—and witnessed the autopsy, apparently going so far as to probe the victim's remains, a "hideous mass or reeking cinders."

On lifting the coffin-lid a powerful and penetrating odor, strongly resembling the smell of burnt beef, yet heavier and fouler, filled the room and almost sickened the spectators. But the sight of the black remains was far more sickening. Laid upon the clean white lining of the coffin they rather resembled great shapeless lumps of half-burnt bituminous coal than aught else at the first hurried glance; and only a closer investigation could enable a strong-stomached observer to detect their ghastly character—masses of crumbling human bones, strung together by half-burnt sinews, or glued one

upon another by a hideous adhesion of half-molten flesh, boiled brains and jellied blood mingled with coal. The

SKULL HAD BURST LIKE A SHELL

In the fierce furnace-heat; and the whole upper portion seemed as though it had been *blown out* by the steam from the boiling and bubbling brains.²⁶

And so on. Hearn was shameless in revealing every detail, but in doing so, he may have revealed his Catholic proclivities. For Catholicism, it has been observed, is an eminently corporeal religion. It concerns itself with the Passion in graphic bodily detail, accepts the preservation of the body, circulates saints relics in the form of body parts, iconically renders the Sacred (and bloody) Heart of Jesus, preserves the grisly demises of saints in its hagiography, and exhorts mortification for its adherents. Its primary rite, the Blessed Sacrament, sanctifies the literal ingestion of the body and blood of Christ (the “Real Presence”), a doctrine so weird on the face of it that it has divided Christians for two millennia. (Transubstantiation was, of course, the reason that only Catholicism would satisfy Flannery O’Connor.)

The description of the victim, in this case, recalls the strangely tender rendering of the immolation of martyrs. Evidently, the sight of such a horrible death moved the young reporter to a reverential frame of mind. When Hearn describes the “agonies of the bitterest death which *men* can die” [emphasis added], he taps a rich vein. The “agony of death” is a Biblical phrase, but it is especially evocative to a Catholic. Christ’s agony in the Garden, and the agonies of his death, would have been visually underscored in the Stations of the Cross that surrounded Hearn in the chapels of his youth. Suddenly the brash agnostic repaired to Christian terms: the “demoniac” and “devilish” murderers will be accountable to “their

God.” Hearn issues a Melvillian sigh for “humanity’s sake,” having felt his own humanity imputed in this particularly awful crime.

If that interpretation seems attenuated, there are other examples where Lafcadio Hearn seems an accidental Catholic. The most interesting example falls in his blood-curdling account of Cincinnati slaughterhouses. Hearn contrasted the sloppy and exceedingly brutal work of Gentile butchers—who frequently mauled their animals cruelly before butchering them—with the surgical precision of a Jewish slaughterhouse. He titled the article “Haceldama,” borrowing one of the goriest moments from the Bible: “He [Judas] indeed hath possessed a field of the reward of iniquity, and being hanged, burst asunder in the midst: and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all the inhabitants of Jerusalem: so that the same field was called in their tongue, Haceldama, that is to say, The field of blood.”²⁷

An oafish gentile puts out a cow’s eye, crying “Got yer eyes sore, din’t ye?—ye d—d infernal best. Thought I’d bring ye to.” The young reporter was riveted by the bungled execution and its unfolding atrocities. After bludgeoning the poor beast to death, the butchers disembowel it and carry out a little dance of death. “With every jump the bloodstream leaped, too, but the blood looked inky, as though turned black with agony, and thus reproaching the black cruelty of the slaughterers.” This is a curious detail, and not just gratuitous, leading Hearn to ask if the brutal butcher might not like to practice his craft on a human. One can imagine Hearn’s shock at seeing the horror he had experienced—the loss of an eye—callously inflicted on an animal.

The Shochet (Jewish Butcher) ran a very clean house by comparison. Hearn writes about him with undisguised admiration for his cleverness. He cannot help adding a few

exotic flourishes. When finished, the Shochet puts his stamp on the meat, “with the mystic characters כשר, or in English letters “kosher,” signifying a sound...”²⁸

A trope that extends throughout his writing: language is sacramental. Catholicism has been called a “magic words” religion. Accusations of “secrecy” and strange rites in Catholicism do have some foundation, after all; the “Secret” is the name of the prayer that the priest whispers at the end of the offertory (and a good source for job security, since the consecration depends on him!), just before the “Sanctus” that Father Father Ryan so adored. Hearn loved the word “incense,” and though the word was surely vogueish, it had special Catholic meaning. When Lafcadio complimented Sir Edwin Arnold’s *The Light of Asia* by saying that the “noble” book had “perfumed” his mind “as with the incense of a strangely new and beautiful worship,” he paid him very high praise indeed.²⁹

The slaughterhouse sacrament was yet to come. Hearn watched the Jewish butcher efficiently dispense with a bullock: “the blood leaped high into the air from a yawning cut six inches deep. It was a bright crimson, a healthy red; and leaped in its jets from the neck at each beat of the dying heart, finally growing thicker, and slower, until its ripple on the floor ceased and it coagulated in bright red patches, in color and form miniatures of the fleecy clouds reddened by a rosy sunset.” Blood-drinkers, Hearn avers, “can not stomach that of bullocks felled with the axe.” In other words, they prefer kosher. “The blood of the latter is black and thick and lifeless; that of the former brightly ruddy and clear as new wine.” The Shochet explains that victims of consumption have been nursed back to health by a diet of blood.

Then comes the gonzo ending for the piece, perhaps not altogether strange for an Irish boy who cut his teeth on black pudding, made of congealed blood. Hearn downed a glass of

freshly-drawn bull's blood, "for curiosity's sake," and certainly to "give the public the benefit of his experience" (Mosaic law prevents the butcher from partaking). The glass is instantly filled, "brimming over with the clear, ruddy life stream which warmed the vessel through and through." Hearn has been handed the cup of life, which keeps away death. Interestingly, he seems unaware of this conceit, or the fact that he treats his subject sacramentally. "And how did it taste?" he teases. "Fancy the richest cream, with a tart sweetness, and the healthy strength of the pure wine 'that gladdeneth the heart of man!' It was a draught simply delicious, sweeter than any concoction of the chemist, the confectioner, the winemaker—it was the very elixir of life itself."³⁰

Thus Hearn unselfconsciously rescripts the consecration of the wine. At no point does he recognize that all Catholics are blood-drinkers. Readers who might have been tempted to try the experiment themselves might have heeded another Hearn article, about a man who drank two glasses of the stuff to fatal effect. Read one way, the report travesties the concept of the communion chalice. Consistent with such a view is the fact that this was arguably Hearn's most American, and most Protestant, phase. He was unswervingly dedicated to making a success of himself and he was dabbling in every sort of belief system he could learn about. Then, too, it may have been a matter of unconsciously applying his store of religious symbolism, somewhat incongruously, to the death of kine.

Certainly he was willing to go to considerable lengths to get his story. The most ludicrous example appears in a column titled "Feminine Curiosity," in which his investigative technique compelled him to dress up as a woman to attend a ladies-only meeting. The subject of the lecture was, in his heading, "A Female Blackguard's Lecture to Prurient Sisters. The 'Escaped Nun's' Matinee at Pike's Hall."³¹ Hearn wanted to find out

what all the hubbub was about, and in so doing, he witnessed one of the strangest social phenomena of the nineteenth century: the convent literature craze. The genre merits fuller exploration not merely because of Hearn's supercilious response—though it is fascinating of itself—but because of its importance to American literature and Irish immigrants.



Illustration 30 Maria Monk, bestseller.

The watershed moment was January 1836, when Maria Monk's *Awful Disclosures of the Hotel Dieu Nunnery* was published. The book made for salacious reading in the guise of interested moral defense, and, in (Father) Mark Massa's memorable turn of phrase, "It sold

like hotcakes at a communion breakfast.”³² Some 300,000 copies flew off the shelves before the Civil War. *Maria Monk* did for anti-Catholicism what *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* did for abolitionism, and indeed, the fable rivaled Stowe’s book in brisk sales. The premise was simple: Maria Monk claimed to have been imprisoned as a kind of convent sex-slave, operating under a myth that persists in anti-catholic crusades, namely, that nuns must obey priests in all things, leading, quite predictably, to “criminal intercourse with them.” (This persistent misconception endures today, and it is a mainstay of the mythology, for want of a better term, surrounding Catholic belief. There were reports of resuscitated convent literature circulating during Kennedy’s presidential bid). The book’s catalogue of horrors—illegitimate babies baptized and strangled, dark rituals in the chapel, etc.—would be risible if the American public had not been eager to take them for true. After it was wisely declined by Harper, the book was published by a dummy press set up by several Protestant clergymen. Her publishers bolstered her “exposé” with pseudo-scientific maps, depositions, and articles.

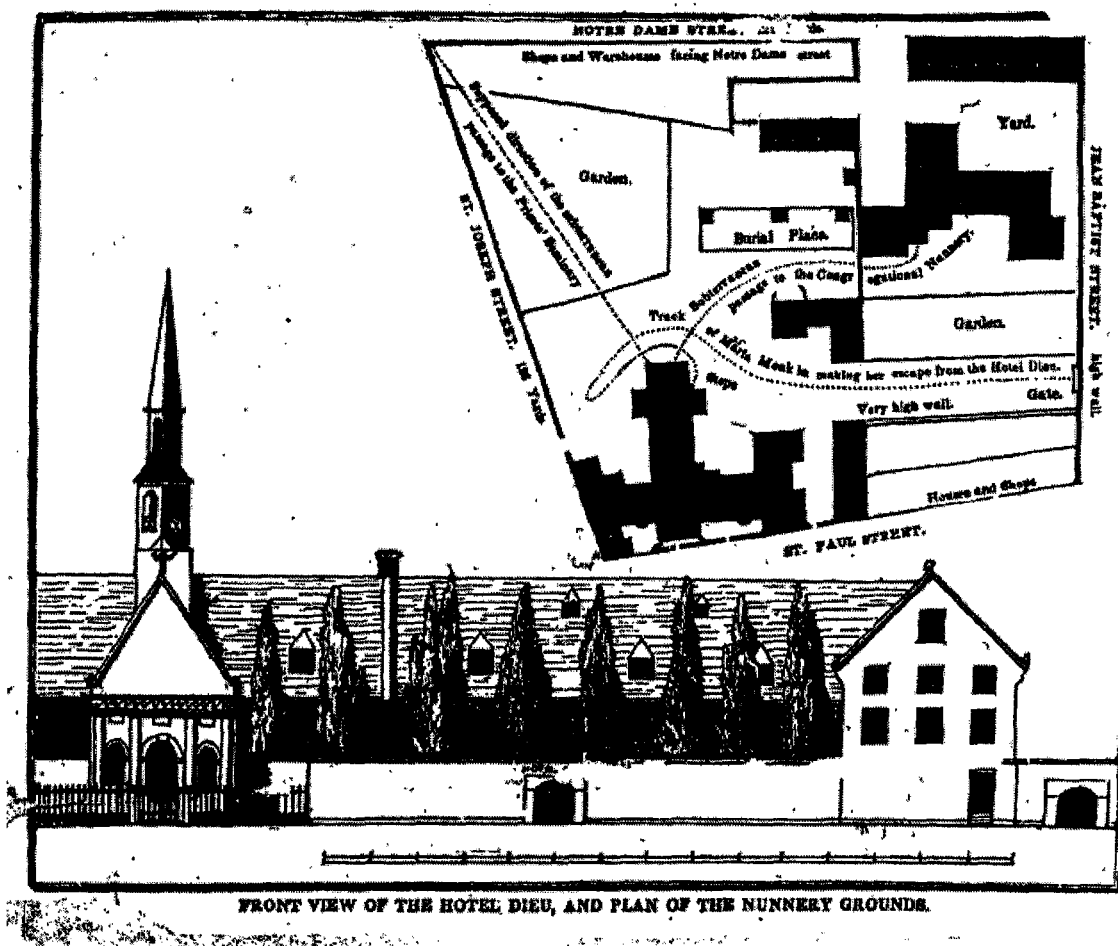


Illustration 31. Adding pseudo-scientific credibility: a map of the convent.

It turned out, of course, that the whole thing had been cooked up. Her mother claimed that Maria had always been troublesome, “damaged by a slate pencil driven through her head as a child.”³³ William L. Stone, a New York lawyer, undertook a personal investigation, fully expecting to find plenty of dirt, and instead met a community of “unaffected cheerfulness and good humor.” A little perplexed, he admitted that he could see why Montreal’s citizens “deemed to look upon the intelligent denizens of the United States, as laboring under a widely extended monomania!”³⁴ After investigating Maria Monk and finding that she was a “dupe,” a single mother with a penchant for fibbing, and possibly a

prostitute (who, after all, functioned as alter-egos to nuns in the genre according to Jenny Franchot), Stone's mission veered to the "emancipation of my own countrymen from the bondage of prejudice, superinduced by the most flagrant imposture."³⁵ Such was the tenor of Catholic suspicion that greeted the Irish diaspora. A host of knock-offs followed, including a very curious book called *Rosamond*, where a Cuban priest and his mistress conspire to kidnap black boys and grind them into sausage meat as a fund-raising stratagem. Either the *Rosamond* author was riffing on the doctrine of the Eucharist, or he had read *A Modest Proposal*.³⁶

Now, as a common sense matter, it is very hard to account for the cultish behavior of Catholic-suspicioning citizens-of-good-standing. How could they possibly believe the allegations, which would shame any crackpot conspiracy theory of our own time? What is the vector of a social paranoia, and how does it become infectious when, to outward appearances, it is utterly irrational? And what induced them to believe stories that a moment's reflection should have known were fabulist rot?

It would be easy to dismiss it all as an odd moment of motley, mobbish groupthink, but incidents such as the 1834 burning of the Ursuline Convent in Charlestown show that these outbursts of fairly crazed behavior had serious consequences. One hesitates to use the word "crazed," or worse, "hysterical"—they are words of social control, after all, and always favor the wielders of power—but there was something fundamentally hysterical about it all. Can psychological phenomena ever be attributed to "a people"? And how can this be reconciled to the truism, that the whole point of a "mob mentality" is that there is little of mentality to it?

The first problem is that singular explanations for group behavior are rarely likely to be satisfactory. The sensationalism of the penny press, coupled with widespread literacy, no doubt fanned the flames. More important, the convent tales offered a powerfully frightful brew. They exacerbated at least three fears commonplace to the hierarchically-inclined, nineteenth century worldview. They (1) presented women who were financially independent and removed from the prophylactic world of hearth and home; (2) they enflamed class division, since Catholics were, even then, the wealthiest subculture in America; and (3) they fueled Nativist fears of foreign domination and Protestant fears of Roman captivity. Not long after the publication of Rebecca Reed's "exposé," *Six Months in a Convent* (1835), on a miasmatic August evening, Lyman Beecher delivered his sermon in his usually captivating style, inveighing "the principles of this corrupt [Catholic] church," which might "subvert our freeing institutions and bring into disgrace all ideas of an effective government." The City on the Hill was besieged. He accused Catholics of "contempt and hostility which they felt towards all Protestants."³⁷

In explaining the violence that followed, Jenny Franchot claims that protestant bricklayers were socially enacting their animosity toward the threatening independence of a mother superior (and nuns generally) when they burned the convent at Charlestown. That may well be, but the language is no more provable (or for that matter useful) than the traditional claim that the crowd had been whipped into a frenzy of anti-Catholic bigotry by manipulative, lowest-common-denominator ministers.

The would-be liberators quite widely informed the Mother Superior—"a woman of masculine appearance and character, high-tempered, resolute, defiant, with stubborn, imperious will"—that they had come to free her from Romish captivity. One of the nuns

who deposed in the subsequent trial said something that “almost induced them to disperse.” As to the sheepish mob’s offer of “their protection,” the Superior “told them she did not require to be protected.”³⁸ There was indeed a good deal of stage-and-act in the affair. The captive nuns and their student charges, who apparently knew something of the convent tale formula and were happy enough for getting out of school, were locked in the garden while the convent was methodically ransacked. (The girls had earlier sassed the selectmen who investigated Reed’s charges, asking “Did you find her in the tomb?”) They probably knew of the event in advance, and in the words of one witness, “There was a strange fatuity in all the proceedings.”

Hearn seems not to have seen Edith O’Gorman’s lecture as anything other than a salacious farce, in which he was a gleeful participant, by “judicious use” of wigs, “trails, veils, and brass”—“your smooth-faced reporter did it.” His gender-bender is a comic vehicle, of course. He trips on his skirts, blushes before the “rude glance” of the ticket vendor, and passes a good deal of comment on finical feminine manners. The tone of the piece is uniformly condescending and the event cannot be taken seriously because Hearn infantilizes the women. The “little angels” made themselves comfortable in the chairs, and a baby had to be silenced at “nature’s font.” “[O’Gorman] told of how good she was, how all the naughty, naught thing other little girls knew she never dreamed of, and then—oh, she made your reporter blush and wish that he had stayed away. The ladies all tittered. Then she got moral and prosy, and one or two virtuous middle-aged ladies left the hall.... Everybody began to look bored and disappointed.” Hearn coyly withholds the details: “A trusting public expect information, but modesty forbids. The women enjoyed it and seemed in a degree happy—the dear things—and they cried and made [a] cunning sound with their ruby

lips that means sympathy and horror combined; and Edith floated off the stage in a blaze of glory, as it were.” “[S]ome very pretty attempts” at applause followed.

And if his patronizing reportage divested the nun of her authority, it seems to have owed to her preposterousness, not some animus toward convent vocation. In an unrelated report, “Carving in the Convents,” Hearn expressed great admiration for woodcraft on exhibition by the Sisters of the Ursuline Convent—not the incinerated one—including a *prie dieu* and kneeling bench, “both of excellent design and delicate cutting.” The *Commercial* picked the right reporter for the story; Hearn was predictably fascinated by the “symbolic and historical emblems of the Ursuline Order, and of the Catholic Christian Church.” “We think we but express the conviction of the majority of those who have seen these specimens of modern art,” he enthused, “in saying that nothing more beautiful in ecclesiastical carving has been seen, for the purpose intended, since the work of the artists of the twelfth, thirteenth, and fourteenth centuries, as seen in the churches and cathedrals of Europe.”³⁹ The point being that he did not begrudge praise where it was due, even if he bore a personal dislike for many facets of Catholicism. Hearn always held out Dante as an artist of the first order.

As to O’Gorman, Hearn was so carried away with his little joke that he let the ridiculousness of the event speak for itself. His impression of “Sly Edith” was that she read her audience like a seasoned speaker; when they began tuning out, she dramatically went to the doors with a finger on her lips, and offered a particularly tawdry anecdote. There may have been enough Catholic fiber left in Hearn for him to bristle at such an exploitive smear campaign. Apparently, he did not for an instant take any of it seriously. And, as Charles Fanning has observed, Irish American writers often singled out convent literature for ridicule.⁴⁰

A number of theories might account for his disposition. Perhaps convent scandal had become passé in the thirty years after Maria Monk. The convent tale may have degenerated to the point where it travestied itself. Edith O’Gorman, after all, gave polite women an excuse to indulge in an afternoon of purple prose and light pornography. Hearn must have the “escaped nun” as an Irish-American of a sharply cunning kind. It may be true that all the world is a stage, and a stage where, an academic might say, we socially enact our culture. That has its place, but there is a way in which the very language betrays an artificial, and needlessly sophistic, distance from the stuff of life. Jenny Franchot claims that Protestant bricklayers were socially enacting their animosity toward the threatening independence of a mother superior (and the perceived anti-familial culture of the nunnery) and her upper class pupils by burning the convent at Charlestown and “freeing” the captive girls. But one is left to wonder: were lurid convent tales ever mistaken for reality by any but the most credulous readers? Should their ubiquity be taken for a sign that American readers were the dupes of a paranoid culture, or that they just enjoyed a trashy story with a dash of religious exotica, just as readers consume the “historical” bodice-ripping pulp fiction of today?

Whatever the answer, Hearn enjoyed himself immensely. The fact of the matter is that during this period he was so ravenous for sensory experience, so intimately involved in the stories he wrote, so wildly creative in his output, and so intrepid in poking around the seamy underbelly, that he can, and should, be considered a kind of nineteenth century gonzo journalist. Indeed, if one considers his experimentation with “opium eating” and hashish, the marginalized people he consorted with, the mad invention of some of his prose, and the occasionally drugged-out bizarreness of his columns, the title is all the more apt. Hearn pioneered the American subcultures of “pariah people”: ragpickers, buck dancers,

prostitutes, prisoners, and Native Americans. The reckless behavior that allowed him to gather his stories engendered his life-on-the-edge ethic and earned him a reputation as a bit of a madman.

Yet there was method in his madness. Along with his later New Orleans columns, they comprise a veritable treasury of mostly bygone speech and song. Lafcadio was fascinated by languages, and while his visual field was literally limited (some of his more imaginative reports seem most suspect in the visual realm), his ear for argot, pidgin, and dialect was unfailing. They provide a valuable chronicle of the bustle, and brutality, of American life in the latter nineteenth century. As Jonathan Cott has argued, he was attempting to expose the thin and ultimately illusory edge between civilization and savagery.⁴¹ In this he owed much to the French writers he was busy translating as side-projects. Other newspapermen assumed that his columns about Cleveland's dens of iniquity, Bucktown and the waterfront, could have been written only by a black man.

Hearn took pride in his ability to "pass" in lowly quarters. His racial and cultural hybridity gave him a passport into America's ghettoized ethnic enclaves. He was born with an important shibboleth: his appearance. He could claim underclass affinity with many of America's ghettoized immigrants. Moreover, "[h]e was English and therefore had much less color prejudice than his associates," Edward Tinker suggests vaguely in his early biography. But his continental education did not prepare him for his ill-starred romance with Alethea Foley, and he seems to have been naive about the rigidity of America's racial caste system.⁴² Foley worked as a cook in the shabby boardinghouse where he stayed. Her father was an Irish slaveholder who lived near Maysville, Kentucky, a town perched on the slaveholding side of the Ohio River—a landmark adroitly portrayed by Toni Morrison in *Beloved*. Foley's

mother was a slave; after the Civil War ended Alethea became a domestic and had an illegitimate child. Poor and uprooted, she naturally migrated to the city for work. It is easy to imagine Hearn's enchantment when he met the beautiful woman, discarded by an Irish father, who arrived in the city with little more than her clothes. Hearn pursued Foley first as a conversational partner and fellow cast-off, and then as a lover. He called her "Mattie."

Notwithstanding his iconoclastic airs, Hearn did have a fundamental sense of moral obligation. When the relationship carried on, he resolved to do right by marrying her. Foley had a clearer sense of the fallout than the Irish-born ingénue, and urged him to consider the practical consequences, along with Hearn's handful of friends, who protested loudly. It mattered not to the outsider, who was astonished to find that no one would second for him at the marriage bureau. He was required to swear that Mattie was white since miscegenation was flatly illegal. One minister simply turned them down. After a black Episcopalian minister wed the two, the marriage, forced in the first place, soon degenerated into something irreconcilable.

The *Enquirer* immediately dismissed Hearn, for euphemistically "deplorable moral habits." He made a theatrical show of an attempted suicide, and had to be restrained from jumping off a bridge. "He would have liked to kill himself spectacularly," observed H.E. Krehbiel drolly, "if he could have written the story for his newspaper."⁴³ Hearn loved life entirely too much to throw it away. After just a few months the newlyweds, equals in passion only, separated. Mattie Foley could be hotheaded—she spent carelessly and she was given to violent outbursts, wielding a razor on one occasion. A series of self-destructive antagonisms eventually deposited her in the Cincinnati ghettos that Hearn had written so sympathetically about. Foley's irredeemably chaotic and wretched life brought home

multiple painful realities for him. His underdog heart led him to see her as misused by a bigoted society, which indeed she was, and he took his obligation to support her seriously, if paternalistically. He wrote that he loved her, “more I fancy than I will ever love any woman,” but that he had been “unjust” to her by marrying her in the first place and “lifting her up only to let her fall lower than ever.” Hearn’s idealism ran aground the real social and economic shoals between him and his chosen love. His romantic (albeit principled) obliviousness to social constraint had worked a good deal of damage, both in his life and hers. And worst of all, he was no doubt aware that he was repeating some of his father’s mistakes. The parallels between Mattie Foley and Rosa Cassimati are evident: Mattie was volatile and asked to live in a culture that did not value and could not accept her. She was difficult to control. She remarried, the second time according to ethnic prescription, to a man within the “Ethiopian community,” as Hearn called it. Like his father, he suffered from what Edward Tinker termed “true masculine lack of perspicacity,” and was not a particularly good catcher-in-the-rye. The situation was impossible; his good intentions could not palliate an estrangement that would lead inevitably to abandonment. The guilt occasioned could only have been as deep as the man was good.

According to Tinker (who is a somewhat doubtful source), Alethea Foley sued for support in later years, but “the Judge decided against her on the theory that there could be no legal marriage between the races.”⁴⁴ The sources are in conflict on this point. Some claim that Hearn supported her long beyond the call of duty, a position reinforced by correspondence that shows Hearn taking an active interest in her affairs even after he had moved to New Orleans. Hearn’s relationships with women were complicated and overlaid with Victorian paternalism. For a long while after the debacle of his first marriage, he

preferred to patronize brothels rather than to cultivate serious relationships. On one occasion, he rebuffed a lady-admirer in cruelest terms: "You must not think me a fool," he warned cuttingly. "You are a fine woman in regard to health and strength; you are not handsome or even a tolerably goodlooking woman physically, and your picture is simply horrible, horrible."⁴⁵ His late-life decision to marry a Japanese woman, who knew no English, seems true to form; he had admitted to Julia Wetherall "that he would not care for intellectual companionship in a wife, but would prefer some simple, quiet creature who would look after his domestic comfort and stay meekly outside of his realm of thought."⁴⁶

The pair were very dear to one another within conventional bounds. Setsu Koizumi walked two steps behind Lafcadio in public, unlike Elizabeth Bisland, the would-be paramour from New Orleans whom he never forgot. Bisland was intellectually alive, assertive and ambitious; at age seventeen she sought out Hearn, whose work she unabashedly adored. She aspired to a career in journalism, to which he played the mentor and kept her at arm's length. He preferred to let languish the romantic undertone of their friendship, thereby squandering his best chance to find an intellectual mate. Her wit unnerved him, and he could not abide her eagerness for power, though he did come to call her his "Fairy Sister." "Only nature and Woman are unspeakably sweet," he insisted. He no doubt had her in mind when he proclaimed, "How diamond-hard the character of the American woman becomes under the idolatry to which she is subject."⁴⁷

But Hearn was no misogynist—at least, not a deliberate one. In an 1880 editorial written for the *New Orleans Item*, he posed a hypothetical:

A girl has been ruined, and lives with her seducer as his mistress—perhaps for a month, perhaps for a year. He tires of her, and feeling himself hindered by no legal obstacle, and knowing the helplessness of the victim, abandons her. After the first burst of grief, she is often compelled to listen to

the advances of another who makes large promises. He treats her in the same manner. After a few more such bitter experiences, she becomes hardened, and abandons herself to degradation.⁴⁸

The solution, he declares, is common-law marriage for cohabitants, binding the man “to support, protect, and honor her as well as though a marriage ceremony had been performed with all ecclesiastical pomp and due formality of law.” The circumstances are suspiciously like Hearn’s own. He elected to make an “honest woman” of his mistress, but would have the law require others to do the same. Yet he is obviously on to something. Writing boldly on the “Prevention of Cruelty to Women,” he observes,

Thousands of delicate women are yearly killed by brutal and cowardly abuse, and the husband is seldom punished. A sudden blow which kills on the instant is murder, but long years of ill-treatment and of cruelty which kills by inches, or, in other words, a systematized manner of torturing women to death, is not punished at all—unless, in the agony of despair, the unfortunate wife has the man arrested and has enough resolution to testify against him afterward in court, which is seldom the case... This is not true of one civilized country alone; but of nearly all.... Civilization cannot be considered very much advanced from a moral standpoint, while the primitive and savage idea of compelling woman to obedience by force continues to pervade the masses....⁴⁹

His was a lonely voice: “Perhaps it may sound chimerical; but we sincerely believe that a law declaring it a crime to strike or ill-treat a woman would have a most desirable effect upon present social conditions.” The rule of thumb—that one should never beat a wife with anything of larger diameter than the thumb—prevailed in Hearn’s day. It took a century or more for his idea to receive statutory backing in most American jurisdictions; it is still contested in some, often because the burden of showing abuse seems “chimerical.” He added, “The importance of protecting women from abuse may be best realized by considering how much of the moral and physical deformity of this generation has had its origin in the ill-treatment of women who were mothers.”⁵⁰

It is one of the many instances where Hearn's underdog sympathies—inculcated partly through his Irish upbringing, certainly—proved to be forward thinking. The Irish, stereotypically, are said to distrust authority. And like most stereotypes, this one probably contains a grain of truth. The Irish had good reason to be wary of courts, with their grievous history of legal manipulation, including the enforcement of Penal Laws, which disempowered them at home, and, for a time, in America. In "A Morning in Police Court," an article with the subhead, "The Tragedy Under the Comedy," Hearn crafted a timeless snapshot of the courtroom. He first named the "*propria personae*" of the court, in his deliberately Latinate and somewhat cheeky malapropism.

They were followed by "the regular bench-full of victims, half a dozen 'shyst' attorneys, one black one, and a few reputable ones." When an officer of the Superior Court makes an appearance he presents "something of the appearance of a big fish that, in search of food, has floundered over a bar into a leech and pollywog pool." "Vags," "bums," "drunks," and "disorderlies" file in first, "of all colors, nationalities, ages and conditions," forming an "old, worn, greasy, stained, semicircle of sin and shame and misery." In a heavily naturalistic passage, one vagrant is described like one of the ostracized automatons of Cormac McCarthy's *Suttree*:

He eats and drinks and sleeps, and the world has nothing further that he cares for. He seems devoid of a spiritual, rational, immortal part, incapable of emotions and affections, and no more a subject for moral government than a mule. He is like an old river steamer run by a rusty steam engine: while there is fire under the boilers the wheels will continue to turn; when it goes out they will stop, and the old carcass will rot and get to pieces. He is charged with vagrancy—the poor old piece of refuse cast back by the ocean of life—that is, charged with being contentedly and consistently in his normal condition. He takes no interest in his trial, is trying to "scoop" a fly from his bare, dirty knee that protrudes from his ragged breeches while the Judge is sentencing him to three months in the Workhouse. He does not notice the

length of the term, but looks momentarily unhappy because he missed the fly, and, rising, shuffles off with others who have ‘got their dose.’

Hearn elsewhere describes the plight of “Alice Alexander, a colored beauty,” who is in trouble for cutting a bar patron who refused to sport her a beer. Certainly personal journalism allowed for forays into fiction. Perhaps Hearn substituted her for Alethea Foley—whose illegitimate child was fathered by a Scotsman named Anderson, not so very far from Alexander. He notes the financial side of court dealings and fees (“great is ‘fluence,’ even in the temple of the blind goddess”) and the excruciating tedium of the place, particularly in cross-examination and deposition-taking. As he puts it, “The evidence in a Police Court case generally tends to confuse and craze a judge, instead of enlightening him.... It is presumable that the infinitely wise Creator has made nothing in vain, and that the ‘Calm Soul of All Things’ has provided that Police Court lawyers shall play their part in the great Universal Scheme, but to our finite understanding it seems as though it would have been better if they have been born monkeys, for then they could have hopped around in a cage and clung to the bars, and snatched peanuts and eat crackers, and in various other ways amused people, and so have been of direct benefit in greasing the wheels and lightening the journey in this weary work-day world.”⁵¹

So Hearn makes them hop instead. An Irishwoman named Ellen Ferris, accused of committing assault and battery on one Mary Buckley, testifies in Irish accent that she was “minding” (mending) blankets for which Mary Buckley failed to pay. When asked what Ellen Ferris did, she replies, “Sure, she het me on the head wid a breck.” Hearn uses the incident to add still more comic relief to his reportage. Shamelessly, he sets up his one-liners: “Jackson [an accused] sat upon the steps of a house on Longworth street and held a

chisel. He had probably been endeavoring to chisel somebody out of a drink.” But his conclusion has a more pessimistic, sarcastic tint as it evokes Samuel Taylor Coleridge:

It is a sorry place for the student of human nature in that Courtroom,
with its ignorance and sin, and shame, and vice in every shape, and besotted
souls, and hang-dog countenances, and low brows, and evil eyes, and lies, and
deceit, and treachery one almost doubts over the sweet old lines—
For the dear God who loveth us,
He made and loveth all.”⁵²

This, for a Catholic, is well nigh unthinkable. It connects directly horrific pointlessness of the many unloved and unlovable characters in Cormac McCarthy’s fiction, such as the Kid of *Blood Meridian*, of whom we know only, “He can neither read nor write and in him broods already a taste for mindless violence.” Christians can accept, as a general proposition, that disorder and chaos are elements of Hell, but they are particularly threatening to a Catholic’s sense of position within the universe. The passage, then, shows Hearn’s skepticism, albeit muted by his awareness of the public forum (“one *almost* doubts”). And because he was determined to ferret out its depravities, he came to feel that he was peering below the lid of hell itself at times. As he explored Buddhism in the last stages of his life, he described the “doubt of all doubts,” “the question which all the sages have had to face: *Is the universe moral?*” To that question,” he concluded, “Buddhism had given the deepest answer.”⁵³

The thin veneer on American-style civilization was all too apparent in a city known as the Porkopolis. He was attuned to its corruptions and its restlessness, but he achieved enough broadness of character to appreciate the limited franchise of its supposedly limitless opportunities. He wrote to a friend: “It is time for a fellow to get out of Cincinnati when they begin to call it the Paris of America.” Still a young man, he had climbed from cub to star reporter and established a name for himself in America. He was hungry for new

experiences. Cincinnati was too cold and dreary for the warm-blooded temperament he fancied he possessed. It was time to go.

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When Hearn landed in Cincinnati, he felt himself a stranger in a strange land. But when he betook himself to New Orleans for the first time, his arrival was more in the nature of a homecoming. He arrived like some sort of returned pauper king, floating down the Mississippi, seated atop cotton bales on the bow of the steamer, soaking it up. In discussing this second of Hearn's various *lives*, I will explain why he felt so comfortable there. I will then explore to what extent he became a southerner, the vicissitudes of his Irish identity, and his achievement as a writer during his Orleans years. Finally, I will examine his politics and the Catholicism that he never quite abandoned.

It is not very surprising that Hearn felt at home in New Orleans, "a Latin city," as he called it. Drawing on the sensitivities of his upbringing, he remarked the culturally Catholic trappings of his new home: "[N]o Anglo-Saxon, for instance, would ever think of naming a street Goodchildren street, *rue des Bons Enfants*, or Love street, *rue de l'Amour*, Madman's street, Mystery street, Piety street, etc. Old Bernard Marigny christened two thoroughfares in the faubourg Marigny which he laid out, "Craps" and "Bagatelle" in honor of two games of chance at which he lost a fortune. A curious mistake was that of the first American directory-maker who insisted upon translating Bagatelle into English and described it as Trifle street."⁵⁴ He knew that there were some things that did not translate culturally, all languages being equal. Having spent part of his boyhood in England and part in France, he

had an acute appreciation for the differences between freewheeling Mediterranean culture and the staid WASP culture. The *mañana* ethic suited him well.

As for the formal culture, Hearn retained a lifelong respect for the English that was founded in ambivalence. Of “The Race-Problem in America,” he wrote that the means of settling racial violence “is a problem of the most serious description. The English press,—reflecting English experience only, and the impulses natural to the most orderly and systematic of all races,—suggests the use of force.” Hearn scorns this particular solution, and may have had in mind the disastrous consequences of such recourse in Ireland. As much as he appreciated the laid-back, *savoir de vivre* atmosphere of Catholic territories, and their capacity to be focused on both this life and the next, he also liked the English rage for order.

On balance, in “The Conservative,” he noted the great disparities in London, the supposed epicenter of Western culture: “He studied her wealth, forever growing, and the nightmare of squalor forever multiplying in the shadow of it. He saw the vast ports gorged with the riches of a hundred lands, mostly plunder; and knew the English still like their forefathers, a race of prey; and thought of the fate of her millions if she should find herself for even a single month unable to compel other races to feed them.” As the jeremiad continues, he lambastes “the conventional hypocrisy that pretends not to see” and marvels at “the religion that utters thanks for existing conditions.” And in a Faulknerian sentence, “No: this civilization signified a perpetual wicked struggle between the simple and the cunning, the feeble and the strong; force and craft combining to thrust weakness into a yawning and visible hell.”

But then he relents, and tempers it all with a note of anglophilia. “He liked the English people better than the people of other countries he had visited; and the manners of

the English gentry impressed him as not unlike those of the Japanese samurai. Behind their formal coldness he could discern immense capacities of friendship and enduring kindness,—kindness he experienced more than once; the depth of emotional power rarely wasted; and the high courage that had won the dominion of half a world.”⁵⁵

The South had elements of English order—the peculiar institution, in particular, required it—but New Orleans offered Romance piquancy and *deshabille*. As he did elsewhere, Hearn immediately set about making himself a person of the place he inhabited. He strove to be a citizen of New Orleans, but it proved difficult because New Orleans is itself a paradox, at once the most and least southern of towns.

Hearn knew that “being southern” required extra conformity, but he retained some of his iconoclasm. Perhaps it was the influence of Twain, Cable, and Joe Harris—whom he could have seen during their literary tour—but he did not hold back his criticism of the state of southern letters. He detested the sentimental southern novel especially, and was moved to notify publishers that “The *Item* will not hereafter notice fourth-rate novels, stupid volumes of poetry, and whatever is generally termed ‘Trash’ in more than one line, if at all.”⁵⁶ Hearn did not suffer fools gladly in the literary sphere, and he could be quite competitive. He began writing serious literary criticism for the *Item*, and cultivating the habit stood him well years later when he was thrust unexpectedly into teaching English literature at the Imperial University of Tokyo.

The volume of learned commentary that Professor Ho-run-san, who had no collegiate education, produced is nothing short of staggering. It attests his monomaniacal drive to master all that he set his mind to, and his ability to retain an astonishing portion of what he read along the way. Nothing was sacrosanct. Hearn naturally began his course with the

Bible, “a product of literary evolution,” on which his views sound remarkably like Faulkner’s. He advised his students to read Genesis, Exodus, Ruth, Esther, the Song of Songs, Proverbs, “and, above all, Job.” But, “of the New Testament there is very little equal to the Old in literary value”—and he recommended only Revelation!⁵⁷

This was not an orthodox southern view, or an orthodox view at all. But that does not seem to have bothered Hearn. When a dispute between two co-workers almost terminated in a duel, he had little use for southern pretensions of honor. The *duello* was a deeply engrained Louisiana tradition; Bernard Marigny won heroic celebrity among city dwellers by surviving many of them. Nevertheless, while the men considered their seconds, Hearn slipped a cartoon in among the editorials.

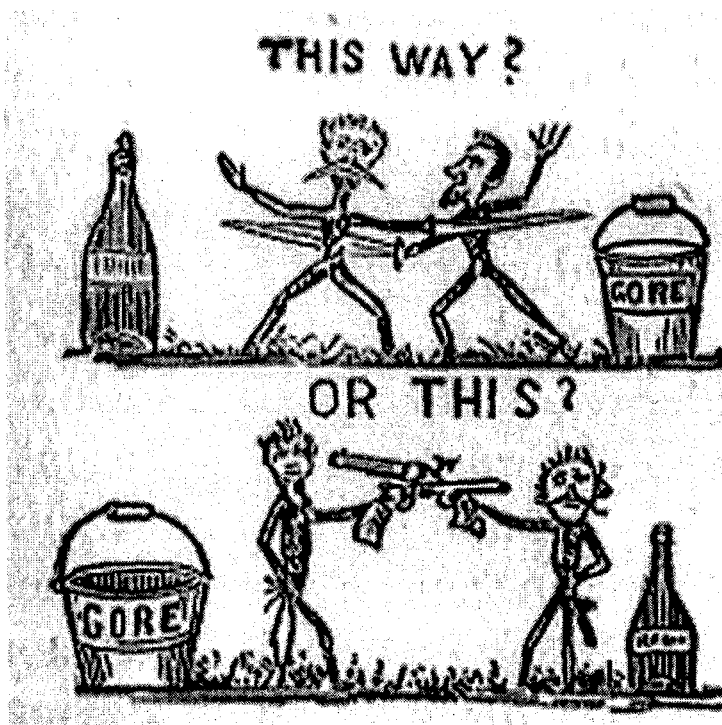


Illustration 32. Hearn’s comment on the dueling tradition in New Orleans.

If racial orthodoxy is the ultimate shibboleth for admittance to southern society, again Hearn is difficult to read. While living in New Orleans, he rebuffed Henry Krehbiel, his old friend/critic from Cincinnati, and his bigoted assumptions about art. "...I do not see less beauty in what was conceived by the passion and poetry of other races of mankind. This is a cosmopolitan art era: and you must not judge everything which claims art-merit by a Gothic standard...."⁵⁸ The Raven, as he often referred to himself among his old Cincinnati companions, was unfettered by racial exclusivity. His racial privilege allowed him to indulge in one of his favorite pastimes: attending the quadroon balls, where, in his opinion, the most beautiful women anywhere on earth were presented. But he was not naïve. He wrote to his friend Harry Watkin to say that an affair such as his marriage with Alethea Foley could never transpire openly in the South.

Instead, discretion was the better part of valor, and Hearn knew how to be seemly. Southerners seem to have taken Hearn into their fold without much hesitation, and they must have liked the way he wrote about Creoles—unlike George Washington Cable. He had his impeccable translation skills to gird him. Still, the doors of closed-society, old-country Creoles remained closed to him—unlike the famous Irish Gallier family of New Orleans, formerly *Gallagher*, he did not put on Creole airs. But his celebrity as a reporter afforded other opportunities to ensconce himself within New Orleans. The very first editorial he wrote after his arrival was an encomium to Nathan Bedford Forrest.

He did not accept all that was southern but seems to have become an accidental defender. He bristled when outsiders ridiculed the region. Hearn's most notorious racial gaffe was prompted by his observation of social divisions in the West Indies and the *Code Noir*. "The greatest error of slavery," he wrote, "was that which resulted in the creation of

mixed races—the illegitimate union between the white master and the African woman, whose offspring remained slaves by law.” Yet Hearn’s concern was a pragmatic one, and it operated within the special constraints of Martinique’s brand of slavery: “everywhere the half-breed race sprang up as an all-powerful element of discord, and finally appeared in the role of an enemy of whites and blacks alike—forcing the parent races apart forever.”⁵⁹ In other words, he reckoned, correctly, that the mixed-race offspring discomfited both races as a visible reminder of the problem of *otherness*. It has been observed that varying forms of slavery produced varying degrees of tolerance. In the end, Hearn’s observations were more accurate than bigoted, more anthropologically nuanced than convulsive.

After all, Hearn was an anthropologist (or, in his words, an “ethnologist”) before the term had come into common use. He collected what he considered to be the exotic trappings of other cultures compulsively. Had there been world enough and time, he might have learned it all. He was as captivated by the languages and religions of the East—he had native speakers teaching him Spanish and Chinese in New Orleans, and studied Arabic on his own—as by the fragments of African speech and culture that studded the New Orleans soil like potshards. He is credited with “the earliest documentation of secular African American songs in urban settings” and for preserving nineteenth-century Creole folk tradition.⁶⁰ He praised a quality of Whitman’s poetry he called “world-beauty,” and focused on the “inexplicable delight of being.”⁶¹ When a Creole musician slighted a roustabout song, Hearn recorded his reply: “‘Nay!’ said I, ‘It hath a most sweet sound to me; and to the ethnologist a most fascinating interest. Verily, I would rather listen to it, than hear a symphony of Beethoven!’”⁶²

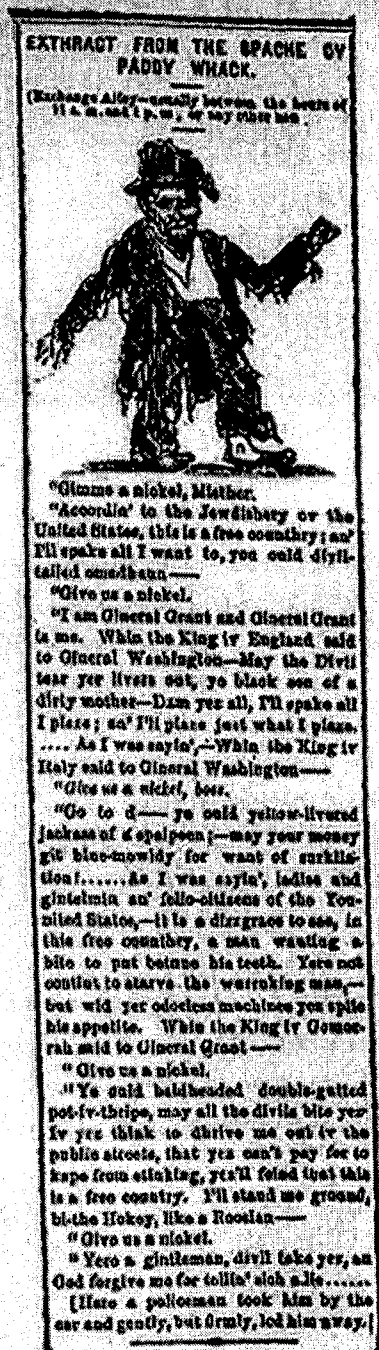
There was no aspect of America's "vast whirl and striving" that he was unwilling to engage—a tendency arguably more *American* than Southern. Thus he was able to develop a considerably varied coterie of friends who hailed from all walks of life. Like Joel Chandler Harris, he kept company both southern and unsouthern. These included the New Orleans literati and a good many Irish acquaintances. He boarded with one of them, an Irish-American woman named Margaret Courtney who mothered him shamelessly. She kept him looking as presentable as anyone could and nursed his frequently irritated good eye. She also prayed for him: "Ah! And I pray God every night on my knees to make you a good Catholic, Mr. Hearn; and you an Irishman, too!"⁶³ He never objected.

He also befriended Mrs. Courtney's "bad, bad" nephew, Denny Corcoran, a well-known character-about-town. Corcoran was essentially a stooge for hire, a three hundred pound mauler who was always armed and always ready to do the bidding of a political aspirant who needed to keep poll-goers in line. Corcoran was something of an expert guide in New Orleans' red light districts, where the two friends often caroused. For his part, Lafcadio contributed to his friend's intellectual development by holding forth on aesthetics. Corcoran reportedly recollected of his friend, "Mr. Hearn, he loved statues and, beggin' yer pardon, de nooder de better, and he often sit in de park and tell me about 'em. I didn't know nuthin' he was talkin' about, but I loved him."⁶⁴

During his New Orleans years Hearn struck up a friendly correspondence with William D. O'Connor, a northern Irish-American abolitionist. He put aside his prejudices long enough to form a friendship with Père Adrien Emmanuel Rouquette, a wellborn Creole who, as these stories are formulaically told, was "kidnapped" in his youth by the Choctaws, liked them, ran away to them, and was eventually adopted by them. He became their priest

after his native fiancé died. The two parted company after Rouquette brought out a pamphlet, in response to *The Grandissimes*, slandering G.W. Cable.

Even with so many friends within New Orleans's thriving Irish community, Hearn was wont to tell others that his father was "English." And he was evidently capable of moments of "racial" self-loathing.



One of Hearn's Illustrated articles from the *Item*.

[87]

Illustration 33. Irish caricature showing Hearn's sense of distance from his roots.

“Spalpeen” is a good-humored term for scamp, and “omadhaun,” more familiarly, a fool. The drunken abuse that the “Paddy Whack” hurls at the lawmen might elicit a few chuckles, and it is perhaps marginally more inventive than the standard stage-Irish gibberish. What prompted Hearn to engage in such an unflattering caricature cannot be known; one can only hope it was misattributed.

It is, mercifully, not representative of his production during the period. In former days, critics conspired to think of Hearn as another ink-stained wretch, a little too much like others to stand out very much, better than a hack, but still an inkslinger among ink-stained wretches. He was so prolific that some of his pieces were unremarkable, particular during the small golden age of American prose. Malcolm Cowley, whose opinion carried a good deal of weight, helped regenerate interest in Hearn’s work by introducing an anthology, but deemed him the “writer in our language who can best be compared with Hans Christian Andersen and the brothers Grimm,” thereby limiting his reach.⁶⁵ Others are put off by his apparently gratuitous exoticism and excessive fascination with what might be termed, to borrow one of his colorful terms, *fantasmagory*. Some have been intrigued by the way he bridged colonial and postcolonial philosophies; his stock has risen greatly in Japan and Ireland for that reason. In any event, the consensuses have been formed, mysteriously, at the expense of some his best journalistic writing, although this is beginning to change, particularly with respect to New Orleans.⁶⁶

His better writing could be breathtaking, even in his period of “gush,” as he called it. Take, for example, “The City of Dreams,” in which he observed what he believed was a widely-tolerated Big Easy idiosyncrasy: the habit of talking to oneself in public. As was his wont, Hearn begins by insinuating that there is something ghostly afoot. “They are

comparatively many, these lover of solitary musing; and usually seek the quiet of the most deserted streets—those streets to which the Secret Police of the East give the ominous name of *dead streets*. Perhaps one might as well say, *streets of the dead*.” Frequently, snatches of overheard muttering pertain to those who “had little hope of favors from the goddess Fortuna,” a sentiment that Ignatius Reilly would second.

The clincher of the article has a poetic meter that is just right. “Seeing and hearing these things, we somehow ceased to marvel that some people dwelling in the city of New Orleans should speak mysteriously and hold audible converse with their own thoughts; forasmuch as we, also, dreaming among the shadows, spoke aloud to our own hearts, until awakened by an echo of unanswered words.”⁶⁷ The last portion of the line reads almost like F. Scott Fitzgerald’s famous conclusion: “So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

Hearn was no poet, but a good deal of poetry inadvertently and happily intruded on his verse. There are curiously many Irish writers who pioneered the art of bringing attention to the play between form and effect, which is to say, that they are credited with ushering in postmodern playfulness. Certainly Hearn had this quality, and playfulness in spades, as evidenced in his colorful cartoons (both verbal and pictorial), incorrigible punning, affectionate impressionism, and off-the-wall subject matter (everything from an ode to cockroaches to roman numeral games to snatches of pidgin conversation). His jokes often spanned several languages so that only a polyglot readership would get them—in fact, he was very much like the brilliant Irish writer, Flann O’Brien (*At Swim-Two-Birds* (1968)), in this respect. I would suggest that this awareness of form is intimately tied to the Irish penchant

for satire. Satire was not on Ryan's mind, however, when he rhapsodized over sea smells, beginning with the invocation, "If you, O reader, chance to be a child of the sea..."

...Twenty years may have passed since your ears last caught the thunder of that mighty ode of hexameters which the sea has always sung and will sing forever,—since your eyes sought the far line where the vaulted blue of heaven touch the level immensity of rolling waters,—since you breathed the breath of the ocean, and felt its clear ozone living in your veins like an elixir. Have you forgotten the mighty measure of that mighty song?—have you forgotten the divine saltiness of that unfettered wind? Is not the spell of the sea strong upon you still?

A similarly lyric passage speaks his enchantment with the coastal quality of New Orleans, taking him all the way back to his roots, in a undeniably classic southern sketch:

It is true that you can not hear the voice of hoary breakers in the moonlight,—only the long-panting of the cotton presses, the shouting of the boats calling upon each other through the tropical night, and the ceaseless song of night birds and crickets. But the sea ships, with their white wings folded, are slumbering at the wharves; the sea-winds are blowing through the moon-lit streets, and from the South arises that wondrous, pale glow, like the far reflection of the emerald green of the ocean. So that the Greek sailor, awaking from the vision of winds and waves, may join three fingers of his right hand, after the manner of Eastern Church, and cross himself, and sleep again in peace.⁶⁸

In the same spirit, he penned a book that Guy Davenport quite rightly called a "lost classic." *Chita* (1889) is Sidney Lanier's "Marshes of Glynn" writ large, or at least, to the scale of a novelette; "a small novel but his largest work," in Arthur E. Kunst's assessment. Kunst points out that the form is deliberately musical; Hearn's prose modulates its rhythms depending on nature's beneficence or fury, from torrential outpouring to spare beauty. It is a work that breathes the systolic rhythms of nature itself. The novel serves as a kind of lexicon for all that is sacred in nature, place, and creed on the Louisiana rim.

Chita reverses the usual pattern of captivity tales. Hearn had heard the story of Creole girl who was the sole survivor of her family after the disastrous Hurricane at Last

Island. She was raised among the rustic island fishermen, only to be rediscovered by a long lost relative. The girl was brought back to the city, but could not abide it, and fled back to her island life. But in Hearn's retelling, her relatives never find her. He projects his own longing for a place to belong in a backwater the time forgot. Louis Rubin and others have commented on the swamp as a dividing line for civilization and anti-civilization; wetlands set many fearsome boundaries in the South.⁶⁹ *Chita* is certainly a great novel of the swamp. It offers plenty of moments where nature menaces, but Hearn is one of the few writers—especially during his time—to rhapsodize about wetlands' terrible beauty, which is, after all, a first step toward recognizing their beauty for its own sake.

But now that I have praised the great man, I must turn now toward dismal sciences—economics, politics, religion(!)—and a more contentious argument: there is no great art that does not have its own politics.⁷⁰ And to determine the key of his politics, I would turn first to Hearn's religion, which began in his conflicted relationship to Catholicism. Did some element of Roman Catholicism survive in Hearn's worldview? Biographers have underscored the fact that Hearn repudiated his Catholicism. Indeed, he came to despise excessive religiosity in others, or at least zealotry that did not agree with his all-embracing "pantheism." He resounded Twain's complaint when he wrote of his then-friend George Washington Cable in 1883, "Don't try to conceive how I could sympathize with Cable! ...His awful faith—which to me represents an undeveloped mental structure—gives a neutral tint to his whole life among us."⁷¹

Hearn could be irreverent. He referred superciliously to "J.C. and company" and once wrote a friend, "Perhaps the G.A. will sentence me to everlasting sojourn in an iceberg when I have ceased to sin."⁷² But he was rarely sacrilegious, even when he donned a kind of

irreligious humanism. Counter-intuitive it may be, but Catholicism is not so easily shed. Where did the idea that Hearn divested himself of Catholicism come from? Some have suggested that Hearn was too sensual a man to make a good Christian, a notion that Hearn himself found risible. Such a notion entirely presupposes what stripe of Christian one should be, and neglects Roman Catholicism's real attitude toward sexuality. The whole notion that Hearn might have shed his Catholicism like a chrysalis its cocoon is bizarre and unexamined to the point of being pat. To reach a truer understanding, there is a first principle that is needful: *Catholic culture* informs a worldview, and is separate from *Catholic religiosity*, which contains the dogma of belief. As regards the latter, there is really only one cardinal test, and that is, Do you believe in the mystery of the communion? (For Catholics, this is, in a sense, "the one thing necessary," but much more is required to be a doctrinaire believer).

On a superficial level, one can argue that there is no more complete rejection than converting to another religion. Thus Hearn's crossing over to Japan and avowed Buddhism settles the issue; if the religion is so deeply rooted, how did he walk away? But a better question might be, how did Catholicism prime him to embrace the new religion? What need did it supply, and what about his Catholicism generated the desire? How is it that so many Catholic mystics, particularly of the twentieth century, have adopted syncretic belief systems that are deeply sympathetic to other religious practice (including Buddhism)? This argument, that Hearn cast off his Catholic complex—and it is a *complex*—is revealed to be false, insofar as the most profound aspect of our character and thinking are shaped during youth, even if training in the principles of rhetoric and reason effaces dogmatic training. There are those who will reply, isn't this rather circular? Could a Catholic ever stop being a

Catholic by your terms? And the answer is, Does a peach stop being a peach if you throw it in the apple orchard?

To illustrate just how completely Catholic culture can enfold a worldview, I would like to make a brief jog into the history of ideas. Catholicism, to use Thomas Sowell's terms, takes a constrained view of human nature: it is essentially unchanging, selfish, and in need of corrective virtue or restraint. This view, as old as the concept of original sin itself, is rather at odds with the liberal traditions of American thought, traditions that Hearn immersed himself in with some abandon. The unconstrained view tends to see human nature as malleable and perfectible. One could try to tease out categories of "conservative" and "liberal," but of course, it is not as simple as that.

Another bedrock dichotomy rests in the fact that a Catholic worldview naturally gravitates toward absolutes and hierarchy. Or, to put it another way, Catholicism insists on an ordered, ordained, and ordinate universe. A good many liberal, American Protestants would see it a different way. In their view, authenticity (including a direct, unencumbered relationship with God) is something that can come from within, and that bear no necessary relation to the material world. The authentic self is available for discovery; it is a reservoir of truth (think of the Transcendentalists and the transparent eye).

The trouble, from a Catholic perspective, is that these American notions of authenticity run straight to individualism, and from there to Protestantism. As the early history of the Church in America shows, a more liberal, self-reliant view of authenticity was an attractive one; so attractive, in fact, that it nearly fissured the early American diocese. But the essence of Catholicism demands sublimation, obedience, and subordination. The

American bishops ultimately bowed. For Catholics, truth does not simply emanate from the self—how could it, when the self is lost?

As Lafcadio Hearn cruised around New Orleans, he wrote about it in supernatural and mysterious language. What he savored was the *mystery* of it all, the sense that a supernatural power moved in it. The locus of the city's enchantment was outside of him and physically present in the place; language provided the sacramental connection to the ineffable. The mark this has left on the popular imagination of New Orleans is indelible. As S. Frederick Starr insightfully observes

At a slightly deeper level is the notion that New Orleans is not quite American, and that its 'otherness' derives from the continuing if subterranean influence of Creole culture by its bearers of all nationalities and races. The diligent traveler does not simply *visit* New Orleans; he or she explores it, seeking out the invisible but authentic reality that is more real than whatever can be discerned on the surface....To experience *authentic* New Orleans is, for the moment, to reject the modern world of which one is a part and to revel in an innocent world of beauty and eros in the moments before its demise.⁷³

Hearn's role in creating this mystique can scarcely be underestimated, never mind that Hearn, very much Poe's disciple, was given to romantic exaggeration. How came he under the belief that he could tap into the *authentic* New Orleans, and that it was becoming extinct? On one hand, this is a perennial artist's preoccupation with life in a fallen world. On the other, it is worth asking what it is about American experience that breeds this belief.

Hearn's sense of authenticity was utterly proleptic: we still operate under his dissatisfied worldview. As Americans began to question the spiritual deadness of material culture, they quested for the unexamined door that would somehow swing open to reveal the richness of human experience. And the tacit assumption was that this was not something easily discoverable. But this is true of nearly every major American ideological movement, and it began with the notion that the "City on the Hill" could be built faultlessly in the New

World. One hears disenchantment in the guilty ruminations of Poe, Hawthorne, and Melville; and the dissatisfaction resounds in the melancholy lassitude of Hearn's writing, where the authentic spirit of the people (and their hopeful cultures) is constantly abating. The pattern is Puritanical, it is Protestant, and it remains essentially changeless. And this strain of thought has proven remarkably plastic, as it continues to surface, in resilient ways, in various American religions. For example, ecologically aware latter-day Americans find themselves living in a "world of wounds," as Aldo Leopold would put it, if they have any conception of the immaculate version of nature passed before. Ultimately, one of the great articles of American faith is the perfectability of the entire social complex.

Thus Hearn had truly become an American, and it had put an insatiable hunger in him, as he realized that the American Dream was little more than self-projected utopian fantasy, not so very different from Watkin's rank nonsense. He first rejected the poms of Cincinnati, whose bustling industries could not conceal seething economic and racial inequities. He then turned to its antipode, the visibly flawed, multicultural and "decaying" world of the Delta South, "in the middle of ruined Louisiana," as he put it. Thus he relocated from the American work-ethic world to a corner of pleasantly indifferent Catholic stagnation.

There he remained very much his own authentic individual. In his inimitable, raffish way, Hearn viewed institutionalism as sheerest folly. He disdained not only parlor talk, but indicted "the churches, the societies, the organizations, the cliques, the humbugs" that, he felt, "are all working against the man who tries to preserve independence of thought and action." When a man married, any chance for meaningful independence was fatally quashed. "Outside of these one cannot obtain a woman's society, and if obtained one is forever buried in the mediocrity to which she belongs."⁷⁴ If the sentiment sounds a bit chauvinistic, it is

equally good for goose and gander. Kate Chopin opined similarly. One need only change the gender of the sentence to see what I mean.

As one might expect, Hearn changed his tune later in life. In a turnabout change of heart, he admitted his grudgingly admiration for the society that he reputationally maligned: the Jesuits. Acknowledging that “in those days being supremely an ass...I thought I could overturn the universe. I was new Archimedes: the lever was enthusiasm! all radicals were my brothers, and had I been in Russia I might have tried to blow up the Czar....” But now,

Thinking over the matter, I cannot help admiring the damned Jesuits. There race-feeling is trampled out of a man’s soul;—there the convention of society are subjected utterly to one spiritual though fanatical idea;—there is religious democracy—equality—fraternity;—there no moral question is caught up as a hypocrite’s mask for race-hate. I almost wish I could believe, and hie me to monastery, or preach Rome on the banks of the Amazon.

This is rather different from what Tinker’s biography, and indeed, most others might lead one to expect (Tinker indexed “Jesuits” with the headings “disputes them at Ushaw,” “unable to endure their discipline at ‘Petits Precepteurs,’” and “conceives intense hatred for”). On the face of it, it smacks of liberalism. But what attracts Hearn is the radical communal ethic of the Jesuits. Similarly, Catholicism prepared Hearn’s outlook for what he found in Japan. In New Orleans he confided to Margaret Courtney, his surrogate mother, that he believed the ant’s morality “far greater than that of the human,” because the creatures were oriented only toward the greater social good. Or, in his view, “properly...there is no such thing as an individual, but only a combination,—one balance of an infinite sum. The charm of a very superior man or woman is the ghostliest of all conceivable experiences.”

That might explain how a man who could never adhere to convention relocated to “one of the most socially adhesive, coercive, and unindividualistic countries in the world, whose subjects conformed to ‘the despotism of collective opinion.’”⁷⁵ He never entirely

found his role there, though he was, in the highest compliment of the islanders, “almost Japanese.” He had found the right *place*, though. Put differently, he distrusted the manifestations of individualism in the same way that a European peasant, or a southerner, might be conditioned to cheerful acceptance (or resignation) within his social estate.

He was, in other words, a conservative, through and through. Eugene Genovese’s tenets of conservatism are usefully illustrative:

HONOR	REJECT AND CONTEMPT
Authority	Liberalism
Hierarchy	Individualism
Catholicism	Protestantism
Aristocracy	Equalitarianism
Tradition	Naturalism
Absolutes	Pragmatism
Dogma	Progress
Truths	Personality
	Schism

Table 5. Eugene Genovese’s simplified conservative dichotomy.⁷⁶

Hearn was already migrating toward the left column (which put him on the Right) during his New Orleans years—he even warned against communism in his New Orleans editorials.⁷⁷ Upon examining his Japanese life (remember that these are the *lives* of Lafcadio Hearn, and as he was the first to admit, he was not terribly consistent), we find him conservative on every point. His admiration for the Samurai class was boundless. He believed in the suppression of personality and individualism, if they were to the detriment of hierarchy and tradition; or, in the appropriate Japanese adage, that the nail that sticks up shall be hammered down.

In “A Conservative,” his protagonist/Japanese alter-ego gives the full storied range of his experience in an extended, sweeping, Whitmanesque passage. In Europe, “the ‘restraining influence’ of religion he did not see. That world had no faith. It was a world of

mockery and masquerade and pleasure-seeking selfishness, ruled not by religion, but by police; a world into which it were not good that a man should be born.” The problem, then, is not the structure, but its perversion. Hearn’s search for absolutes would remain unsatisfied, even in Japan, where bourgeois culture was taking its predictable toll.

He became disenchanted with New Orleans for the same reason. It could not be retrograde enough to satisfy Lafcadio’s ever-shifting tastes. He particularly longed for “ancient” civilizations, and concurred with his friend Kriehbiel, who said, “This is not a country to dream in, but to get rich or go to the poorhouse.” In such a world, “little phantoms of men,” Lafcadio groused, “are blown about like down in the storms of human struggle: they have not enough weight to keep them in place.” Perhaps what he most resented was the relentless competition of it all. As a journalist, he viewed himself as trapped on a treadmill: “[Y]ou must revolve and keep revolving with the wheels....The more you involve yourself the more difficult it will be for you to escape.”⁷⁸ It was a timeless writer’s complaint, but it was accurate. In some respects, the fortune-making country offered no quarter for a self-styled “word-artist in embryo.”

Hearn was plainly offering a critique of the bourgeois ethic infecting America. Genovese would maintain that he was attracted to pre-capitalist economic world well suited to Catholic belief. Connections between Catholicism and intellectual defenders of the South run deep. It is no accident that many of the southern agrarians gravitated toward Catholicism, which offered a complete set of philosophical underpinnings to bolster their position. This is because Catholicism implicitly accepted authority and hierarchy, rejected liberalism and egalitarianism, and meshed neatly with the conservative fabric of white southern culture, which in some ways was *plus Catholique que le Pape*. The somewhat idealized views of

agrarian tradition hearkened to the serfdom of middle ages, and what was Mother Church doing then, but perfecting the architecture of the Chain of Being? (This is precisely the halcyon view taken by Ignatius Reilly in *A Confederacy of Dunces*.) Genovese's early work observes the limitations of a slave society: "Representing as it did an archaic regime, [slavery] had to repudiate much of the stunning scientific progress of the age, for it could not assimilate its methods, its spirit, or more than a fraction of its technical achievement."⁷⁹ But Catholicism had no problem with the archaic, and could often be found flourishing amid decay. "I think civilization is a fraud," Hearn once wrote, "because I don't like the hopeless struggle."

Hearn clung to what S. Frederick Starr calls "a Manichean world view that pitted Good against Evil in an unequal struggle." It was Manichean, insofar as deprivation was, in some instances, a desideratum. Such a world view is quite consistent with Catholicism: we inhabit a fallen world, and evil wins the day. "His notion of a gentle, aesthetically rich, feminine, sensual, and fragile Creole culture gradually losing out to the Anglo-Saxon world of Mammon could be transferred wholesale to Meiji-era Japan."⁸⁰

It suited him to live in a land of spirits. Hearn's ecumenical mind drew parallels in facially disparate beliefs. For Hearn, *ghostly* was a compliment along the lines of "soulful." He explained his theories by drawing on the weight of two thousand years of Catholic tradition as he attempted to render Western belief intelligible to his Japanese students:

In the modern formula of the Catholic confession, which has remained unchanged for nearly two thousand years, you will find that the priest is always called a 'ghostly' father—which means that his business is to take care of the ghosts or souls of men as a father does. In addressing the priest, the penitent really calls him 'Father of my ghost.' You will see, therefore, that a very large meaning really attaches to the adjective. It means everything relating to the supernatural. It means to the Christian even God himself, for the Giver of Life is always called in English the Holy Ghost.⁸¹

Had Hearn started a similar synthesis in New Orleans, he might have stayed around. Catholicism's ability to synthesize pagan traditions meant that the other religions dissolved in the larger Catholic pot, whereas Protestantism, in some cases, afforded better opportunities to preserve elements of older traditions, including African (witness call-and-response and gospel music). As Eugene Genovese asks, "Where [in Protestantism] was one to find room for an Ogun cult translated into homage to Saint George or Saint Anthony?" Hearn's fascination with New Orleans' underworld led him to a close acquaintance with Marie Leveau, the Queen of Voodoo, and, of course, the King of Hoodoo, Jean Montanet. Although he noted that Catholics were horrified to find Voodoo fetishes in their homes ("New Orleans Superstitions"), he was not yet prepared for a full exploration of the Catholic roots of voodoo practice. But he was moving in that direction.

He always sought the deeper layer, so Hearn was unobtrusively in touch with the vestigial pagan elements of Catholicism. He relished the carnival spectacle of Catholic countries: "Why, do we not all wear masks in the great carnival mummary of life, in which we all dance and smile disguisedly, until the midnight of our allotted pleasure time comes; and the King-Skeleton commands, 'Masks off—show your skulls'?"⁸² It is a pity that Hearn never visited the Capuchin Chapel in Rome. Human bones affixed to every surface comprise the entire decorative motif in a macabre, if visually arresting, chapel-sepulcher. It visually represents the kind of Catholicism that Hearn grudgingly liked. For his part, he insisted that his remains should go to a *moldering* cemetery.

"What a book I could NOW write about Roman Catholic country," he declared, "...after having lived in Japan. In order to write well about Catholicism, one must have studied paganism *outside of it*. The whole poetry of the thing then appears. Who can really

feel the poetry of the Bible except the man who is not a Christian?" And then Hearn acknowledges the difficulty of a syncretic Catholicism that cannot be explained merely in terms of Orientalism, but that must be parsed into the extraordinary complexity of the pre-Christian traditions of its supporting cultures: "Roman Catholicism in some Latin countries—with its vast world of ghosts, saints, evil and good spirits at each man's elbow—its visions, its miracles, its skulls and bones enshrined in silver and gold—its cruelties and its consolations—its lust-exasperating asceticisms that create temptations—surely to understand it all one must have felt either the life of the pagan or polytheistic Orient, or understand profoundly the polytheism of the antique West. A book on Latin life—studied through polytheistic feeling, sympathetic feeling—would certainly be a novelty. Strange sensations might be evoked—new even to the nineteenth century."

One of the factors that drew him to Buddhism was that he could not believe in "world without end." Viewed on a galactic time-scale, Hearn argued, Christianity seemed short-sighted. He asked, "What is ... the use of the life of a solar system—evolution, dissolution,—re-evolution, re-dissolution, forever more? Really, Buddhism alone gives us any consolatory ideas on the subject; but it is now vulgar to mention Buddhism to the Japanese." That was because the country was modernizing rapidly and jettisoning the remnants of its religious tradition. Ironically, for a man who had no patience for the organized religions of the West, he viewed this as highly regrettable. Hearn believed that religions flourished in socially stable environments; they thrived best when they evolved with a place.

His Catholic roots were showing again. He once confided to his Japanese wife that he should like to live in a Buddhist temple. She recalled that he said, "I should prefer to be a

priest, and how pleased I should be if I could be one.” He elaborated this prosaic fantasy: “You could become a nun at the same time, and Kazuo [his eldest son] a novice. How cute he would look! Every day we should read the scriptures and take care of the graves. That would be true happiness.” Hearing this, his wife said, “Pray that you may be born a priest in the next world.” To which Hearn replied, “That is my wish.” Hearn wrote at length on Buddhist theory, but in this family exchange, he seems to have misappropriated some of his religious concepts, since “nun” and “priest” do not exactly apply.

If I were very rich I should perhaps think quite differently—or, what would be still more rational, try not to think at all about it. Religion under an empire preaches the divinity of autocracy; under a monarchy, the divinity of aristocracy. In this industrial epoch it is the servant of the monster business, and is paid to declare that religion is governed by God, and business by religion—“whoever says the contrary, let him be anathema!” Business has its fixed standard of hypocrisy; everything above or below that is to be denounced by the ministers of the gospel of God and business.

Hearn seems a little tongue-tied here, but he is really writing his way toward his own understanding. As Eugene Genovese brilliantly observes, “when conservatives are not extreme *laissez-faire* liberals, or apolitical literary men who dabble in literary abstractions...they have difficulty in not ending up as fascists. And when they do, they embrace the final hypocrisy, for fascism has nowhere been other than the dictatorship of capital over labor.” As Hearn leaned toward the right and groused about capitalist mammon, he began to sound like a socialist; when he leaned still further, a fascist. He often recounted how nine of his boy’s school pupils, when asked what they “would like most in the world,” answered, “To die for our Sacred Emperor.” Ironically, he had come to exalt the same sentiment that he would have found outlandish in a Catholic peasant. Indeed, when his friend expressed his surprise, Hearn contrasted hollow nationalism with “the sincere heart-rooted character of loyalty” in the village. Hearn wanted it both ways. He called himself a

demophobe, yet as Jefferson Humphries observes, he “preferred the company of ordinary people to society folk” and blamed the power-wielders for the “tasteless encroachments of modernity.”⁸³ There is no getting around it: fascism held a certain appeal for this man of strong ideas.

Elsewhere, he mused in “The Question in Germany,” an editorial from 1878, that the empire had stretched itself thin in the pursuit of great military might. Then comes a remarkable moment from a man who refused to injure insects. Hearn suggests the “one-to-be-hoped-for solution”:

[T]he invention of labor-saving machines of destruction, the substitution of machinery for millions of men in warfare. Bulwer Lytton represents the Vril-ya, when declaring war, as disdaining to send any more than half a dozen children against the enemy’s country. One child is sufficient to destroy an army with its vril-rod. What civilization wants is a vril-rod—a lightning machine to fight with—an electric battery capable of wiping out an army at a distance of a hundred miles, or pulverizing a city like London with a random flash.⁸⁴

If only he knew. It is a singular statement, and biographer Edward Tinker alleges that editor Page Baker initially refused to run it because it was so “abusive.”⁸⁵ Jarringly militant it may have been, but no one could deny that it was prescient. Although he reviled Progress, Lafcadio recognized that some technologies were worth pursuing. Responding to the advent of electrical lighting, he forecast the rapid introduction of the technology, and asked, “Might not the enormous hydraulic power which we could draw from the Mississippi River be utilized for public illumination? ...This is a matter for engineer and electricians to consider, and it seems to us to involve a question of economy eminently worthy of consideration.”⁸⁶ In “Fantastic Possibilities of Invention,” he again speculated on the use of “electricity as a weapon.”⁸⁷ He also foresaw “the invention of a flying machine.” “If it be true that every impression received through the medium of the sense creates a tiny record in the plastic

substance of the brain, perhaps we may yet have a microscope powerful enough to enable us to read a brain like a book.” Of course, that, too, has come to pass. He also dreamt of “a telescope which would reveal to us the minutest details of life in other planets,” and the discovery of “some method of communicating with the nations of worlds belonging to other solar systems.” Finally, he asks, “were it possible to commingle” the “elements composing human flesh and blood,” “why may we not dare to fancy that some future student of the protoplasmic basis of life, might prove a more successful creator than Frankenstein?”

Atomic weapons, aeronautics, multi-resonance imaging, brain mapping, the Hubble, radio communication, genetic engineering: considered a flake in his own time, Hearn seems to have been something of a visionary. Whether that tends to show genius is open to debate. But some of his other speculations were even more far-reaching. In the alloy of Eastern and Western philosophies—and even the idea of dividing them is passé, I hasten to add—Hearn saw the salvation of the world. He predicted that “a Buddhism strongly fortified by Western science will meet the future needs of the [Japanese].” He later enlarged the doctrine to include the human race. Perhaps the ultimate tribute to Hearn’s prescience is the philosophy that he left behind. He wanted pantheism, but his was a mind conditioned for Religion, in the Western Sense: a system of belief, rationally explicated. He proved a very capable and intelligent interpreter of Buddhism and its ineffabilities.

Putting aside his Buddhist wanderings, I have argued that he did not succeed in divesting himself of his Catholic identity. The question remains, how did he interpret his Irishness? Late in life, Hearn likened Japan to Ireland, which reflects something of his comfort there, and attests to the circularity of his lifelong flight. Hearn did not write much directly in point of the Irish; the newspaper caricature hardly fits with the many friendships

he cherished with New Orleans Irish. Clearly, it did not behoove a socially ambitious, new American/southerner to dwell overmuch on his Irish roots. Nevertheless, I have underscored the instances where an Irish upbringing seems to have influenced Hearn—his love of wordplay, his frequent association with Irish Americans, his willingness to consort with the racial other, his wanderlust, and above all, his latent Catholicism.

Among the globe-spanning tales he recounted for his readership was one of venerable Irish origin. It was a pregnant choice. The tale of St. Brendan (which he gives as “Brandan,” most likely because it sounded that way to his ear), who “sailed with his twelve chosen brethren in search of the Blessed Island which lies in perpetual calm, bathed in the sunny waves of the Western Sea.” Personable and intrepid—Brendan supposedly undertook his seven-year journey in his hoary mid-eighties—his voyages were set down in the *Navigatio Sancti Brendani Abbatis* some five hundred years after his death in the sixth century. It was the beginning of the great age of the wandering Irish (*scotti peregrinni*), as the island disseminated Christian missionaries throughout Europe to stem atavistic paganism during the benighted Dark Ages; so many, in fact, that one European bishop was prompted to ask if any Irish remained in Ireland. Tradition has it that they sailed at least as far as Iceland, and a good deal of pseudo-scientific literature persists urging that Brendan and company touched down at various points in North America.

The sources and analogues from ancient literature, woven into Brendan’s “narrative,” are well documented. They must have presented a veritable feast to Hearn, who might have recognized elements from Homer’s *Odyssey*. He retells one of the best-known moments from the cycle, Brendan’s encounter with Judas Iscariot, who clings to a rock during a brief remission from Hell. The Saint, Hearn’s kindred spirit, “had long bemoaned the turbulence

and violence of his own land, and”—alluding to Brendan’s unusually rigorous asceticism—
“the luxury and worldliness of its priests and even its monastics.” But even the most
infamous sinner is granted a respite in recognition of a good deed.

It is a story that befits a soul hungry for a homecoming, told by a spiritual wayfarer
who sought out his own asceticism, and whose religious rebellion brought him back to a
native conformity. From Irish Catholicism to American liberalism to straitening
conservativism: *Plus ça change, plus c'est la meme chose*, as the French say.

Notes

- ¹ Lafcadio Hearn and Delia LaBarre, Chita : A Memory of Last Island (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2003).
- ² Sean G. Ronan, Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan : Writer, Journalist & Teacher (Folkestone, Kent, UK: Global Oriental, 1997) 1.
- ³ Ronan, Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan : Writer, Journalist & Teacher 35.
- ⁴ "Lafcadio Hearn." Edwin Anderson Alderman, Joel Chandler Harris, Charles William Kent, C. Alphonso Smith and Lucian Lamar Knight, Library of Southern Literature, Compiled under the Direct Supervision of Southern Men of Letters (Atlanta: Martin and Hoyt Company, 1909).
- ⁵ Jonathan Cott and Lafcadio Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn, 1st ed. (New York: Knopf, 1991) 18.
- ⁶ "The Catholic Novelist in the South." Flannery O'Connor, Collected Works, Library of America (New York, NY: Library of America, 1988) 861.
- ⁷ Wyatt-Brown, Hearts of Darkness : Wellsprings of a Southern Literary Tradition 9.
- ⁸ Ronan, Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan : Writer, Journalist & Teacher.
- ⁹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 17.
- ¹⁰ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 16.
- ¹¹ Lafcadio Hearn and Charles Woodward Hutson, Editorials (Boston, New York,: Houghton Mifflin company, 1926) 85.
- ¹² Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 210.
- ¹³ "Lafcadio Hearn." Alderman, Harris, Kent, Smith and Knight, Library of Southern Literature, Compiled under the Direct Supervision of Southern Men of Letters.
- ¹⁴ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 22.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 181.
- ¹⁷ Ibid.

- ¹⁸ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 207.
- ¹⁹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 29.
- ²⁰ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 36.
- ²¹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 39.
- ²² Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 114.
- ²³ Adapted from Sean G. Ronan's "The Horror and Ghostly Writings of Lafcadio Hearn." In Ronan, Irish Writing on Lafcadio Hearn and Japan : Writer, Journalist & Teacher 148.
- ²⁴ Hearn notes that "James' actions in jail, his last farewell to his relations, his sensitiveness in regard to certain reports afloat concerning his past career, and lastly, the very fact that his nerve did finally yield under a fearful and wholly unexpected pressure, all tend to show that his nature was by no means so brutally unfeeling as had been alleged." He was not spared a brutal death, however.
- ²⁵ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 70.
- ²⁶ All quoted newspaper passages come from the following sources, unless otherwise stated: Lafcadio Hearn and Simon J. Bronner, Lafcadio Hearn's America : Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials (Lexington, Ky.: University Press of Kentucky, 2002), Lafcadio Hearn and Jon Christopher Hughes, Period of the Gruesome : Selected Cincinnati Journalism of Lafcadio Hearn (Lanham, Md.: University Press of America, 1990), Lafcadio Hearn and O. W. Frost, Selected Writings, 1872-1877 (Indianapolis, Ind.: Woodruff, 1979).
- ²⁷ Acts, i, 18-19
- ²⁸ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 66.
- ²⁹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 126.
- ³⁰ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 68.
- ³¹ The Cincinnati Enquirer, Jan. 22, 1874.
- ³² Mark Stephen Massa, Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice (New York: Crossroad Pub., 2003).
- ³³ Franchot, Roads to Rome : The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism.
- ³⁴ Franchot, Roads to Rome : The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism 160.

- ³⁵ Ibid, 161.
- ³⁶ Hearn also wrote a series of recipes, and explained in one of them how to make Tartar Sauce out of—Tartars. It was a sophomoric joke, of course.
- ³⁷ Massa, Anti-Catholicism in America: The Last Acceptable Prejudice 24-5.
- ³⁸ Jenny Franchot, Roads to Rome: The Antebellum Protestant Encounter with Catholicism (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994) 145.
- ³⁹ Hearn and Frost, Selected Writings, 1872-1877.
- ⁴⁰ Fanning, The Irish Voice in America : 250 Years of Irish-American Fiction 2.
- ⁴¹ See “A Sensational Reporter” in Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn.
- ⁴² “He was English and therefore had much less color prejudice than his associates,” Tinker suggests vaguely. Edward Larocque Tinker, Lafcadio Hearn's American Days (New York: Dodd Mead and company, 1924) 27.
- ⁴³ Elizabeth Stevenson, Lafcadio Hearn (New York,: Macmillan, 1961) 55.
- ⁴⁴ Tinker, Lafcadio Hearn's American Days 28.
- ⁴⁵ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 184.
- ⁴⁶ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 285.
- ⁴⁷ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 285.
- ⁴⁸ Lafcadio Hearn, Editorials, ed. Charles Woodward Hutson (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1926) 86.
- ⁴⁹ Hearn and Hutson, Editorials 84.
- ⁵⁰ *Item*, April 6, 1880. Reprinted in Hearn and Hutson, Editorials 84-6.
- ⁵¹ Elsewhere in the same article, Hearn describes “Alice Alexander, a colored beauty,” who is in trouble for cutting someone who refused to buy her a beer. Perhaps Hearn substituted her for his mistress, later wife, Alethea Foley—whose illegitimate child was fathered by a “Scotsman named Anderson,” not so very from Alexander.
- ⁵² The Cincinnati *Commercial*, July 8, 1877.

- ⁵³ From "The Conservative." Extracted in Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 319-24.
- ⁵⁴ "Starting Over." Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn.
- ⁵⁵ From "The Conservative." Extracted in Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 319-24.
- ⁵⁶ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn.
- ⁵⁷ Lafcadio Hearn, Ry uji Tanabe, Teisaburo Ochiai, Ichir o Nishizaki and Ralph Walker, On Art, Literature and Philosophy, Revised edition. ed. (Tokyo: The Hokuseido press, 1941) 1-10.
- ⁵⁸ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 179-80.
- ⁵⁹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 210.
- ⁶⁰ Hearn and Bronner, Lafcadio Hearn's America : Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials 31.
- ⁶¹ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 161.
- ⁶² Hearn and Bronner, Lafcadio Hearn's America : Ethnographic Sketches and Editorials 33.
- ⁶³ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 170.
- ⁶⁴ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 176.
- ⁶⁵ Lafcadio Hearn and Henry Goodman, Selected Writings (New York,: Citadel Press, 1949) 15.
- ⁶⁶ S. Frederick Starr's handsomely introduced volume is a great step in this direction. Cf., Lafcadio Hearn and S. Frederick Starr, Inventing New Orleans : Writings of Lafcadio Hearn (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001).
- ⁶⁷ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 126.
- ⁶⁸ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 119.
- ⁶⁹ Louis Decimus Rubin, The Edge of the Swamp : A Study in the Literature and Society of the Old South (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1989).
- ⁷⁰ And to understand Hearn's work, we must know something of his political leanings. Politics—by which I mean simply the transactions of power in human affairs—are to literature what key is to a piece of music. They set the tone. The listener must work in

reverse process to the composer, and listen attentively before the key can be discerned. So it is with a writer's politics, which might be at first invisible, but taken in the entirety, give meaningful structure to literature, and inform its deepest philosophical structures and epistemology.

⁷¹ Wilson, Patriotic Gore: Studies in the Literature of the American Civil War.

⁷² Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 226.

⁷³ Hearn and Starr, Inventing New Orleans : Writings of Lafcadio Hearn xxiii-xxiv.

⁷⁴ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 184.

⁷⁵ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 318.

⁷⁶ From Eugene D. Genovese, The World the Slaveholders Made: Two Essays in Interpretation (New York: Pantheon Books, 1969).

⁷⁷ "Were There Communists in Antiquity?" Hearn and Hutson, Editorials 32.

⁷⁸ Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 200.

⁷⁹ Eugene D. Genovese, Roll, Jordan, Roll : The World the Slaves Made, 1st Vintage books ed. (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) 240.

⁸⁰ Hearn and Starr, Inventing New Orleans : Writings of Lafcadio Hearn.

⁸¹ "The Value of the Supernatural in Fiction." Cott, 346.

⁸² Cott and Hearn, Wandering Ghost : The Odyssey of Lafcadio Hearn 173.

⁸³ From the introduction of Hearn and LaBarre, Chita : A Memory of Last Island.

⁸⁴ Hearn refers to Edward Bulwer-Lytton, who is remembered for two things: coining the most clichéd opener in English literature ("It was a dark and stormy night...") and writing one of the first examples of science fiction. That book, titled *The Power of the Coming Race*, envisioned a group of subterranean superhumans. It inspired many a eugenicist, it seems, and it also engaged Lafcadio Hearn, proponent of Darwinism. Hearn, Editorials 9-12.

⁸⁵ Tinker, Lafcadio Hearn's American Days.

⁸⁶ Hearn and Hutson, Editorials 253.

⁸⁷ *Item*, June 25, 1878.

CHAPTER V

A Look Ahead: From Stranger to Southerner to Strange

They were both Irishmen born and proud of it and prouder still of being southerners and would have withered any relative who tried to put on the dog.—Margaret Mitchell describing her family patriarchs in a letter to Harvey Smith, March 15, 1933.

Catholicity has given me my perspective on the South and probably gives you yours.—Flannery O'Connor in a letter to Cecil Dawkins, July 16, 1957

Now if in the next twenty years we find ourselves with a batch of wild Southern Catholic writers who fail in all these things and, in addition, have certain positive obnoxious qualities—such as a penchant for violence and grotesquery and religious enthusiasm—we are doubtless going to wonder how these strange birds got hatched in our nest.—Flannery O'Connor, "The Catholic Novelist in the Protestant South"

My Catholic upbringing caused me to focus on ritual and metaphor, both things which play an important part in my writing.—Memphis writer Margaret Skinner in a 2004 interview¹

* * *

The parallels between Lafcadio Hearn and Kate O'Flaherty Chopin are many: both spoke French and English fluently, both translated French literature to English, both were fallen-away Catholics, both viewed marriage as a potentially degrading entrapment, both wrote about the nuances of Creole culture and racial hierarchy, both explored permissive notions of human sexuality, and both suffered the loss of a parent in early life (both parents, in Hearn's case). Both pursued unique visions of human authenticity in an innately artificial parlor society, a society that they sometimes detested and sometimes longed to join. They were, in short, like many other southern Irish writers, conflicted rebels.

But Chopin's writing veered from Hearn's in an important respect. Chopin imagined a social order that was largely arbitrary and aware of its own artifice. She drew attention to the gaps: the areas where characters failed to fulfill a social role, or questioned, or met misery by obeying the prevailing social paradigm. In "minding the gap," she had outgrown the omniscient narrator and set about inventing some new devices—coy pauses, arch substitutions, and comment withheld to significant (and sometimes sarcastic) effect. The welter of critical opinion regarding whether or not she was properly a Modernist has subsided, and even those who reject, on principle, that she was an aesthetic Modern would probably admit, on balance, that her work was so forward-looking that it adumbrated the movement. She may not have been a fully credentialed Modernist—how could she be, since she did not live to see the Great War?—but this is largely a matter of term-setting. Chopin's influence on the Moderns who followed her attests to the broad expanse of her reach.

Her views of religion were also rather modern. In the short-short story "The Night Came Slowly," Chopin excoriates a man who teaches "Bible Class," "detestable with his red cheeks and bold eyes and coarse manner and speech. What does he know of Christ?" she demands. "Shall I ask a young fool who was born yesterday and will die tomorrow to tell me things of Christ? I would rather ask the stars: they have seen him."² In *The Awakening* (1899) she wrote that Edna Pontellier was "beginning to realize her position in the universe as a human being, and to recognize her relations as an individual to the world within and about her. This may seem like a ponderous weight of wisdom to descend upon the soul of a young woman of twenty-eight—perhaps more wisdom than the Holy Ghost is usually pleased to vouchsafe to any woman."³ Knowledge is tied to the Trinity, but there is perhaps a sardonic note here, and an implicit criticism of the patriarchal roots of knowledge. "Lilacs"

is Chopin's archetypal Madonna/Whore story, rather literally illustrated, and a brilliant study in the connections between Catholic self-abnegation and self-destruction.

Chopin was also what David Lodge has called a "Catholic agnostic," a term not so oxymoronic as it might seem. But because of that fact, it is easy to undervalue how seriously she took faith, both in terms of her life and her writing. Indeed, her writing began under Irish Catholic auspices. A fresh-faced young nun with a knack for intuiting her students' talents required Kate O'Flaherty to keep a Commonplace Book, which is fortunate for literary posterity, because it now provides the earliest sample of her writings. Sister Mary Philomena O'Meara was a first-generation Irish American. Emily Toth describes her in terms much like Katie O'Flaherty—"precocious and willful, curious, and imaginative."⁴ Kate's "much-loved teacher" solicited whatever there was of the serious student in her sixteen-year-old charge, who was not known for applying herself to her studies. Because she was close in age to the students, it has been suggested that many of the girls simply looked up to her, including the future writer, who worked hard to please her.

Some of her youthful exposure to racial difference is recorded in the scrapbook. Among the verses she copied were a description of Mrs. Jamison, a character in *Sketches of Art* (1857) by an Irishwoman, Anna Brownell Jameson. "Her features are regular, and her mouth—, the most expressive of them," Kate transcribed carefully, "has a ripe fullness and freedom of play peculiar to the Irish physiognomy, and expressive of the most unsuspecting good-humor."⁵ Kate O'Flaherty's best friend, Kitty Garesché, described her friend's "arch, sprightly expression," and described her as taking after her father, "an Irish beauty." The Irish beauty spoke at her high school graduation, choosing for her address a composition,

“National Peculiarities,” which, unfortunately, has been lost. It was an appropriate topic for multiethnic Saint Louis.

Chopin later translated a French piece about phrenology that tendered such illuminating observations as, “all peoples of Cimbric origin, those inhabiting the borders of the Mediterranean, North-Germans, Swedes and Norwegians are dolicocephalous (having elongated skulls), whilst peoples of Celtic origin, Southern Germans, Austrians, Hungarians, Swiss, Irish and Gaelic are on the contrary, brachycephalous (round-skulled).”⁶ Racial taxonomy was in the air, and the adolescent girl would have been sensible to descriptions that touched on her ethnicities. But Kate’s Irish-born father, Thomas O’Flaherty, died in a train accident when she was just five years old. The extent of his influence on her during her young years can probably be summed in two formative incidents: first, her enrollment at Sacred Heart Academy, and second, the day she accompanied him on his work rounds (with an obligatory first stop at the cathedral). After her father’s death the women of a proudly French Catholic household raised her. Naturally, the question arises, Did Chopin have any meaningful sense of Irish ethnic identity?

Some of Chopin’s early critics attributed some of her skill as a *seanachie* to her Irish roots. “She was of Celtic blood and spontaneously a storyteller,” wrote critic Fred Lewis Patee in *The Cambridge History of American Literature*.⁷ But gauging by her fictional opus, Kate Chopin’s views of the Irish are fragmentary, incomplete, and thin. Very few of her stories make mention of Irish characters. Only one of them, “A Vocation and a Voice,” offers an Irish protagonist from the notoriously rough-and-tumble Kerry Patch. The tale was written during Chopin’s most productive period, between 1894-1896. The stories from that

time were some of the last to be collected. Although they are among the most modern that Chopin wrote, only “The Story of an Hour” is widely known.

“A Vocation and a Voice” required Chopin to stretch her point of view a bit, since her omniscient narrator hovers around a male character from the blue-collar ranks. Chopin was decidedly from the other side of the tracks. She only briefly attended the Academy of the Visitation, popularly known as the “the Castle of Kerry Patch,” on the fringe of the Saint Louis Irish ghetto. Nevertheless, she knew the notorious neighborhood well enough.

Her “boy” who emerges from “the noise and grime of ‘The Patch’” is never named, except when he is later christened “Brother Ludovic” by a religious order. The other names familiar to the boy of “A Vocation and a Voice” are Irish: Donnelly and Doran. Actually, “the boy” is on the verge of manhood, and has a growing sense that he is merely a replaceable part in the social machine—“a vague sense of being unessential which always dwelt with him.” But he is also a somewhat conventional lad with a mild sense of caution. He serves as an altar boy and heeds Father Doran’s admonitions seriously enough to avoid cursing. He contributes to his family’s upkeep where he can, and his eyes are “dark and quiet...not alert and seeking mischief, as the eyes of boys usually are.”

One already has the sense that the boy is somehow a displaced person within his community, or at least in some uneasy relation with it, so it comes as no great surprise when he realizes he has nothing to lose by leaving it. The generic protagonist drifts out of the Patch on a fine autumn day after meeting a fortune teller, whose real name is Susan, but who goes by the more exotic trade name, “Suzima.” Suzima is given to salty talk, but “[t]he boy was not shocked by her language; he had not been brought up in ‘The Patch’ for nothing.” She travels with one “Gutro, otherwise the Beast,” whose “dialect, when he spoke, was as

indescribable as his origin was undiscernable,” and who is frequently “drunk and abusive.” The boy falls in with the “unconventional *ménage*,” in Chopin’s term, and travels widely, occasionally to the “South country” where pecans are plentiful.

It is, at first, an agreeable venture for all concerned. Then Chopin starts letting fall signs that civilization still has a certain hold on the lad. While in the South, he chances upon a priest, who is surprised and gratified to learn that the vagabond is a Catholic. The boy takes on altar duty in town, and, the reader learns, rehearses “the service half audibly.” The lines that Chopin quotes are from Psalm 43, the opening of the Mass: “*Judica me, Deus, et discerna causam meam, de gente non sancta—ab homine iniquo et doloso erue me.*” Chopin is as deliberate as ever in her choice; the verse, translated, goes, “Give judgment for me, O God, and decide my cause against an unholy people, from unjust and deceitful men deliver me.” This raises the primary ambiguity in a story pregnant with liminal meaning. Who are the unholy people, and in what sense? What is Chopin’s ultimate disposition toward civilization and claims on sexual morality?

The sexual atmosphere of the story builds steadily. Suzima attends mass with the boy, where she resembles some of the “Cadian” women present, only of freer carriage “vigorous vitality.” Chopin broadly signals the dangerous sexuality of Suzima-Susan, who at one point says, “I’ve know people that were helped a sight by prayer-meeting,” a cue that she is probably from Scots-Irish, Protestant stock. Suzima gushes the Catholic mass was “out of sight,” particularly the Latin rite, which she considers incorporating in the hocus-pocus of their enterprise in fortune telling and quack-potions.⁸ But the boy rebukes her for the notion, and his squeaky-clean Irish Catholic breeding shows through. He answers, “Why, it’d be a sin.”

Though she initially supports his religiosity, Suzima sees signs that he is getting a trifle too attached to the village priest (and priest's village), and more important, not paying her much attention. She pressures him into giving up his church duties and "the man whose kindly spirit had been moved to speak and act in his behalf." When the priest urges him to stay, "[a] savage instinct stirred within him and revolted against the will of this man who was seeking to detain him." The reader is invited to *cherchez la femme*: "He had seen indistinctly the shadowy form of Suzima lurking nearby, waiting for him." But it should be underscored that Suzima is not a Catholic; she is certainly irreligious, and has only the most shallow interest in the faith. All the while, Chopin develops a strong undercurrent of sexual immanence in the story.

It is finally realized in an Edenic encounter. Sent on an errand by the increasingly querulous Gutro, he finds her bathing, naked, in a river. The scene is entirely expected, but the description is at once scandalously detailed and subversive: "He saw her as one sees an object in a flash from a dark sky—sharply, vividly. Her image, against the background of tender green, ate into his brain and into his flesh with the fixedness and intensity of white-hot iron." Male desire is quite vividly—and I would submit, accurately—imagined by Chopin, who understands how intensely visual such an encounter might be. The toothsome girl covers up, but the damage has been done. He cannot escape the *image*. Burning in lust, he misdirects his libido toward Gutro by loosing a "torrent of invective and abuse."

Inevitably, the tension between Suzima and the unnamed boy is relieved in the back of the wagon, of a moonlit night. The precursor to a truck bed should be enduring proof of Chopin's southern chops (not to mention an antecedent to *The Grapes of Wrath*). Significantly, Suzima initiates the contact with a touch of her bare foot: "she folded her arms

about him,” *she* “drew him close,” and *she* “held him fast.” The flesh is weak, and the boy acquiesces to the sexually assertive woman in role reversal that would have been quite unusual in the fiction of the time. But of course the encounter only produces trouble. Before long the boy jumps to Suzima’s defense when Gutro loutishly menaces her with a beating. He glances Gutro with his knife, who quickly figures out that there was something between the two. Gutro, at that point, becomes a satanic figure, who further unmans the youth by resounding his “oily, choking laugh” through the woods with a “vile clamor.” Suzima reddens. The boy refuses to join them when they leave, though she beckons. Sitting on the grass, “he felt as if he had encountered some hideous being with whom he was not acquainted and who had said to him: ‘I am yourself.’” So he prays to “God and the saints and the Virgin Mary to save him and to direct him.”

Or rather, redirect him. Conveniently enough, he wanders directly into a monastery on a hill “with gilded cross” that lies one mile away. At the start of the tale, the boy has mused that heaven might be something like the sun-kissed autumnal day of his wanderings, “and if Father Doran was not misled in his conception of a celestial city paved with gold.” Now he invests his energies entirely in the religious vocation for which he is surpassingly well equipped. The other religious admire him for his diligence; he is troubled only by dreams of beckoning Susan, which he wards off by prayer.

The boy, now Brother Ludovic, undertakes to erect a stone wall around the “Refuge.” Based on his banter with other monks, it is clear that they are Irish (“You’ll not be telling me it’s yourself that lifted the stone, Brother Ludovic”). Chopin’s heavy-handed sense of irony intrudes on the narrative when one of the brothers jokes that “it’s a prison he’ll be putting us in.” On a spring day the boy/brother surrenders himself once again to his moonlit vision, and

somewhere between dreams and waking, he hears the gypsy/siren. The monk jumps the proverbial unfinished wall. Curiously, the story bears strange parallels to Joel Chandler Harris's "Where's Duncan?"—another story where the characters travel in a canvas caravan, there is a dark stranger (Gutro, or perhaps the boy, if you like), a good deal of racial ambiguity, and a numinous, moonlit encounter, a kind of favorite setting for sinful happenings in American literature from Hawthorne to the present.

Chopin upends conventional expectation about gender roles; notwithstanding Freud's declamations, the woman of the story is the force driving the boy *away* from society, rather than forcing his hand to consigning a social contract. Moreover, it is a trope of Catholic hagiography to relate, in frankly erotic terms, the ecstasy of saints (witness Bernini's famous sculpture, "The Ecstasy of Saint Therese"). Saint Therese was struck by a "flame-tipped arrow"; in "A Vocation and a Voice," the boy's flesh "tingled and burned as if pricked with nettles," and "pricked and burned." The question is, who does the pricking? Implicitly, Catholicism recognizes the bonds between spiritual and sexual fulfilment, wherein God's creative power is acknowledged in desire. That power, it seems, cannot be immured.



Illustration 34. Gian Lorenzo Bernini's *The Ecstasy of Saint Theresa* (1647-52)

The boy is the product of Irish Catholic education, and the sexual knowledge burns within him. But the gypsies of the story are perhaps not particularly “unjust and deceitful,” and in any event, their morality and worldview is not so incompatible with the boy’s. Catholicism merely proves to be the wrong talisman for holding them off—when the spirit is willing. And the fundamental good/evil dichotomies of Catholicism are, to some degree, a matter of his invention, and a failed attempt to interpret the good priest’s parting words to him: “Forget not your creator in the days of your youth.” The boy wars not merely against his sinful nature but nature itself, and its designs for youth. The story, set in a lush southern landscape, illustrates perfectly the deep-seated conflicts of conformity and rebellion so important to Irish Catholic identity.

Two other Chopin stories make use of Irish ethnic themes. “A Matter of Prejudice” offers a Creole named Madame Carambeau, “a woman of many prejudices,” who may have been modeled in part on Chopin’s father-in-law. Dr. Jean Baptiste Chopin hated all things not French and most others besides. As Emily Toth put it, “Kate Chopin did not have an Irish brogue—but she had begun life as an O’Flaherty, which was bad enough in Dr. Chopin’s eyes.”⁹ In any event, the francophilic M. Carambeau experiences a change of heart after becoming attached to an “American” child whom she takes under her wing. This leads her to some peculiar and unprecedented behavior, including attending mass at St. Patrick’s, where she sat through “a lengthy English sermon, of which she did not understand a word.” She declines the help of the child’s “red-cheeked Irish nurse-maid” (recall the “detestable” Bible instructor that Chopin called “red-cheeked”) on the “original theory that the Irish voice is distressing to the sick.” The presence of an Irish nursemaid, or the fact of her church attendance at Kate Chopin’s old parish, are incidental to the contrasts between the imperious Creole and the Americans.

“Nég Créol” offers a more direct look at the Irish, again in contrast to Creole culture, but this time the Irish come off as a bit benighted. “Purgatory Mary,” “a perambulating soul whose office in life was to pray for the shades in purgatory,” appears along with an “Irishwoman with rolled sleeves” named Bridget (given “Brigitte” by Mamzelle Aglaé). Both, it can be inferred, are Irish. Purgatory Mary specializes in small-time simony, if Aglaé is to be believed. The Irishwoman is unduly solicitous of the ailing Mamzelle, and, in order to keep the peace, does not spare her children the rod: “It’s a shtout shtick I’m afther giving her, Nég, and she do but knock on the flure it’s me or Janie or wan of us that’ll be hearing her.” When the Mamzelle passes away, Purgatory Mary fetches a priest, prepares the body,

and starts the vigil; the Irishwoman goes for a doctor. A child who peers in on the proceedings, fascinated, is rebuked: “Will ye get down on yer knees, man, and say a prayer for the dead!” The child, who is either black or dirty, “refused to obey. He approached the bed, and laid a little black paw for a moment on the stiffened body....” This prompts Purgatory Mary to mutter “The black h’athen!”—though she is in the middle of a rite that has many heathen trappings.

The tableau of cast-off, lower-class characters seems to be a comment on the superstitions of the poor, and the narrow ways by which they secure small dignities. It might also be a droll comment on a truly pan-ethnic Catholic underclass and their shared, inadvertently pagan values. But the story also reflects a measure of unselfconscious savagery rooted in ignorance, and it is clear that Chopin writes it from the top. Chopin visited other New Orleans ethnicities in her fiction; “A Shameful Affair” and “Wiser than a God” both offer German characters on a footing with the Irish. Though she was quite capable of writing sympathetically about the underclass, Chopin was full of all the hierarchies that her French upbringing had vested in her—including an awareness of the kind of double-standards that permitted Frenchmen to take mistresses. In a recent interview, Elizabeth Fox-Genovese offered her own explanation for Chopin’s apparent comfort with human estates, as they pertained to slavery:

It’s important not to underestimate the influence of her Catholicism which was quite comfortable with the idea—in fact promoted the idea—that every human person could be excellent, valuable in the eyes of God, without occupying the same social situation or standing, without playing the same social role. This is a perspective that would say that men and women can be equally valuable without being equal, in the sense of being identical and doing these same things. So I think she was very comfortable with difference in social station, that she did not spend her life feeling that it was an acute injustice that there were social classes, for example.¹⁰

As a matter of class, it is clear that Chopin separated herself from the Irish. And given her father's premature exit, it is to be expected. The family's regard for that ambitious man—and in particular, Kate's mother's relationship with a man many years her senior whom she married expressly for money—is uncertain. There is some speculation that Chopin re-envisioned her mother's relief on word of her father's death in "The Story of an Hour." There is additional speculation, based on nothing more than assumptions of male privilege, that Kate's father, Thomas O'Flaherty, may have fathered some of the family's mulatto slave children. Regardless, it is clear that Kate Chopin's education and manners fell to her mother and her relatives, who aspired for the girl to embrace her French ancestry. And embrace it she did, since the rest of her life was spent in the Creole circles in which she made a *meté* marriage.

There is no need to defend Chopin's faith, or lack of it. Her efforts to conform herself to Catholic doctrine on sexual practice deeply conflicted her life. Dogma provided a mainspring of her fictional conflicts, too. The documentarians who produced "Kate Chopin: A Re-Awakening" interviewed David Chopin, Kate Chopin's grandson, in 1999. "People knew that Kate had left the church," he told them, and "somebody remembered that they saw her coming down the steps of St. Francis Xavier Church, which is in mid-town St. Louis, and figured that maybe the reason she was in church was to go to confession, and get back into the bosom of the church again. So it's my understanding that on the basis of that little incident that they opened up the gates and allowed her to be buried where she is today in Calvary Cemetery."¹¹ The parishioners of St. Francis Xavier were predominantly "the well-to-do Irish," and perhaps it is fitting that Chopin returned to them in death.

By contrast, Margaret Mitchell spent a lifetime trying to legitimize her identity as a southern Irish Catholic in print, but was interred to the cadences of Episcopalian rites. Still, she was a maverick to the last, and that makes her difficult to account for. Once deigned a middlebrow writer that critics loved to hate, her stock is rising again, despite her single novel's unselfconscious racism and its historically counterfactual missteps. Part of the book's power may be gauged by the continuing literary and cultural fascination with it. Alexandra Ripley's *Scarlett* (1991) offers a sequel, and Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone* (2001) gives voice to an African-American complement. Few would deny that *Gone with the Wind*'s iconic power makes it the single most important book in defining international perception of the South. Depending on how one counts the numbers, it is the most popular novel of the twentieth century. The book naturally appeals to Americans who are, in a way, rebels all, and who love a story of the underdog.

Moreover, two trends are emerging that are generating a reevaluation of the book. As Marianne DeKoven urged, "[M]odernism is an ideal literary territory for the feminist critic to rechart," and a renaissance in the understanding of women's writing in Modernism has been ongoing for the better part of twenty years.¹² Within this context, Mitchell's work is ripe for analysis. Second, within the past ten years, a good deal of middlebrow literature—once considered off-limits to serious academic study, which favored the kind of high culture production that New Critics conspicuously defined—has enjoyed renewed academic interest amidst the multiplication of genres and specialties associated with cultural studies.¹³ Both trends work to bring Mitchell's book front and center, as has been seen in new criticism by Patricia Yaeger and Drew Gilpin Faust, to name a few.¹⁴ Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Anne

Goodwyn Jones have reconsidered Scarlett's skillful navigation of gender identities, alternating between her "scripted one and its ostensible opposite."¹⁵

One of the more interesting questions about Mitchell was whether her Irish Catholic roots conditioned a conservative, and perhaps blinkered, view of history, that somehow cut her off from *avant garde* Modernists. There were unquestionably "modern" elements to Mitchell's own life. While still in finishing school she wrote a novel, now lost, and a short story about a woman who avenges her sister by murdering the sister's rapist. Mitchell matriculated to Smith College, ever the redoubt for southern ladies' education. There she awakened to the exhilarating possibilities of womanhood, and experienced heady times. She rechristened herself "Peggy," not as a diminutive nickname, but as a play on her chosen symbol, the winged mythological horse.

Her bifurcated personality, with its contrasting shyness and sauciness, drew many suitors, and she enjoyed playing the "baby-faced vamp." In her politics and her flapper's attitude, she shared much in common with Zelda Fitzgerald, who also styled herself a southern belle *fatale*. She began working for the *Atlanta Journal* in a period where men still dominated the newsroom. Her witty columns showed the influence of Ring Lardner and H.L. Mencken, whom she admired greatly. Mitchell was deeply influenced by the nascent southern literary renaissance, and she loved the witty salaciousness of James Branch Cabell. Around this time she penned a novelette, "Ropa Carmagin," later discarded by her heirs. Accounts of it, however, describe a Faulknerian southern gothic, replete with a decrepit big house and an interracial love affair.

In her compulsive urge to tell about the South, in her life, and especially in her own historical redaction, Modernist currents influenced Mitchell. Louis Rubin countenances

Modernist elements in *Gone with the Wind*, and points out that it shares a good deal of common terrain with *Absalom, Absalom!* Scarlett O'Hara is, transparently, a modern heroine wrapped in hoopskirts. And Elizabeth Hanson argues persuasively that the book is a work of Modernist fiction that answers to the debates raging between the socially progressive Odum apostles at Chapel Hill and the staunchly conservative Agrarians at Vanderbilt. She maintains that "[Mitchell's] critics have generally ignored the parallels between *Gone with the Wind* and other texts, such as Faulkner's *Absalom, Absalom!*,"—apparently excepting Rubin—"Tate's *The Fathers*, and Welty's *Delta Wedding*, which share with Mitchell's work a vision of southern history as a source of human consciousness." Apart from the primacy of southern history, Hanson points to Mitchell's historical exploration launched by a "catalytic image from the past," as well as "gothic moments of exaggeration, recognition, truth, and ultimately, disillusion within their fictions."¹⁶

While recognizing their validity, I find these latter arguments somewhat less than compelling. To call *Gone with the Wind* "gothic" tortures the ordinary understanding of the term, as it applies to southern literature. Perhaps the most modern elements of *Gone with the Wind*, in my estimation, are Mitchell's dark-tinted observations about the meanings of southern identity, and the distinctly American prerogatives—for example, avarice, sexual manipulation, and sharp dealing—motivating her southern version of success. In this Scarlett bears a surprising resemblance to Jack Burden, Warren's cynical narrator who has the mystique of a *film noir* hardnose about him. The wisecracking, cynical type became a Hollywood staple, and there is clearly a movie influence at work in Mitchell's book (before it became an epic film), but the roots of Mitchell's jaundiced views are in her family roots, which extended to the days when Atlanta was called Marthasville, and beyond.

Maybelle Stephens Mitchell, a suffragette leader and “sainted” mother, loomed large in her daughter’s memory. She did not spare the rod, or rather, “the hairbrush and #3 slipper,” but she taught her daughter to live by her own terms. Despite their deep southern pedigrees and upper-middle-class status, Mitchell’s ancestors had always stood apart in one important respect: the family came of Anglo-Catholic stock by way of Maryland, with Irish Catholics and Protestants marrying in along the way. Margaret Mitchell was a fully-pedigreed southerner, but as an Irish Catholic she would have a hard time making that argument to other southerners, particularly those outside of her Atlanta circle. So she set about realizing the fictional universe that would prove her southernness. *Gone with the Wind* is in large part a *tableau vivant* that, for the first time, dares to imagine an Irish Catholic family at the beatific center of the plantation.

As a child, Margaret Mitchell read voraciously and absorbed the firsthand family lore of Civil War veterans and Reconstruction, but she understood them as betokening hard-fought acceptance in southern society. It is no accident that Scarlett’s grandmother, who speaks frankly about “kick[ing] the folks whose necks we’ve climbed over,” passes on the ultimate lesson to her granddaughter: “gumption” is what’s required to get on in the world. “That, my child, is the secret of survival.” And that was very much the Mitchell family creed.

The image of the novel, however, has overtaken some of its subtleties, including its defrocking of aristocratic pretension. Margaret Mitchell celebrates the successful yeoman farmer to a far greater extent than the julep-sipping gentlemen farmers and their sundry mountainous conceits. Notoriously iconoclastic Rhett Butler serves as a gainsaying mouthpiece. She unflinchingly deflates the Cavalier myth: Ashley Wilkes is “queer”

because the Wilkes's "grandfather came from Virginia." In other words, Mitchell was sympathetically attuned to W.J. Cash's vision of the "stout Irishman" turned plantation squire.

It has been observed that Faulkner accomplished the same sort of thing with the ruthless, monomaniacal Thomas Sutpen. And the novels share other commonalities; Joel Williamson and others have argued that Rhett Butler has an aura of otherness suggestive of "black" identity.¹⁷ For her part, Mitchell admired Faulkner's work consistently. She wrote a favorable review of *Soldiers' Pay* and sent him compliments. But Faulkner, perhaps stung at *Absalom, Absalom!*'s being passed over for the Pulitzer that Mitchell captured, did not return them. Asked if he had read *Gone with the Wind*, he replied that he had not because it was "entirely too long for any story," and grumbled that no story takes a thousand pages to tell.¹⁸ But Mitchell melted when she received accolades from Thomas Dixon, adding that she "was practically raised on [Dixon's] books and love[d] them very much."¹⁹ Likewise, when Virginius Dabney, a "fellow rebel of the Generation of 1900," praised the book for dispensing with the mythic Old South, Mitchell beamed, "I certainly had no intention of writing about cavaliers."²⁰

For Mitchell to fawn over compliments from the author of *The Clansman: An Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905) shows just how cramped southern identity could become for an Irish Catholic. Mitchell lived during the nadir of Atlanta race relations and at a time when the Klan claimed widespread support in Georgia; *The Clansman* not only inspired *Birth of a Nation*, but it became something of a rallying cry for the new incarnation of the organization. Perhaps Mitchell simply did not realize that Dixon's novel glorified the Knights. But perhaps Dixon was the one who failed to notice that the heroine of *Gone with*

the Wind was an Irish Catholic! In any event, Dixon wrote his sentimental novel before anti-Catholicism had become an enshrined part of the Klan agenda.

Thus Mitchell received praise from some unlikely sources. But critics subsequently hastened to canonize Faulkner—itself a considerably an irony, since the “corn cob man” of *Sanctuary* infamy had written his share of potboilers, detective stories, and other dimestore fodder once regarded as “trash novels.” Eventually, critics would heap praise on Faulkner’s novel for the myriad of narrative perspectives that it brought to bear on the pageantry of southern history. Mitchell’s novel contains its share of asides and some amount of critical commentary, but it offered primarily one perspective.

That perspective was grafted from the plantation novel of the old school, full of the Lost Cause sensibility popularized by Thomas Nelson Page, Thomas Dixon, and Abram Ryan. The bulk of criticism which seeks to reclaim Mitchell’s novel begins by distancing her from these writers by pointing to the behind-the-scenes roles of female characters, the diversity of the sketches of southern types, her attacks on the cavalier, etc. But that can only go so far in a novel that condones vigilantism to defend female virtue from what was alleged to be black animalism. *Gone with the Wind* deserves a measure of critical attention, but not because of its running catalogue of Lost Cause platitudes, which can and should be placed before the southern stereotypes she pricks. True, her Lost Cause plantation is in the interior, but it still exalts moonlight and magnolias with unaffected sincerity.

And ultimately, she failed to escape her own enchantment. “Since my novel has been published,” she sighed to Dabney in a letter, “I have been embarrassed on many occasions by finding myself included among writers who picture the South as a land of white-columned mansions whose wealthy owners had thousands of slaves and drank thousands of juleps....

But people believe what they like to believe and the mythical Old South has too strong a hold on their imaginations to be altered by the mere reading of a 1,037-page book.”²¹ *Gone with the Wind* may have failed by succeeding; the world of antebellum civilization that it depicts, including its flaws, is simply too attractive. Its racial views come too exclusively from the racially insulated world that Mitchell inhabited at the low tide of southern race relations, and in this, at least, Faulkner surpassed her.

It may be great storytelling, but it is not as critically interesting as many other works of the period, perhaps because Mitchell is so invested in her *own* history. On the other hand, Mitchell never intended to elicit uncritical acceptance of Scarlett. She reminds us that her heroine “was driven by a conscience which, though long suppressed, could still rise up, an active Catholic conscience.”²² Indeed, Scarlett frequently has twinges of guilt and more than once speaks of having a cross to bear.

Scarlett also has an *Irish* conscience, and this raises a final issue: did Mitchell get Irishness right? The autobiographical elements that gave rise to fiction’s *sui generis* Irish Catholic plantation mistress are thoroughly documented in Darden Pyron’s *Southern Daughter*, and his work is supplemented by a few scholarly monographs on the subject, as well as one brief book-length exploration, David O’Connell’s *The Irish Roots of Margaret Mitchell’s Gone with the Wind*. O’Connell’s book is highly entertaining, lively, and occasionally enlightening, but it also contains a number of mistaken theories, misinterpretations, and errors of fact.²³ Nevertheless, all acknowledge what Eliza Russi Lowen McGraw points out, that *Gone with the Wind* “teems with ethnic categorization.” From “a Gallic twinkle” of the eye to Jewish stereotyping, the book offers quite a menagerie of prejudices (in the fairly innocent sense of the word), including Irish Catholic biases—

Gerald O'Hara calls the neighbor who urges him to sign a loyalty oath "that God-damned Orangeman."²⁴ McGraw further suggests that "Mitchell employs the language of racial passing," borrowed from the tragic mulatta narrative; Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) predated Mitchell's book by seven years. In a pivotal moment, Ashley's sister India snubs Scarlett by sneering, "you aren't one of us and you have never been."²⁵ Calculating creature that she is, "Scarlett periodically aspires toward the whitest part of her lineage, desiring at times to be like her mother, Ellen, who personifies upper class femininity and elegance."²⁶ The scene that transpires between Scarlett and a visitor from Maine is very revealing, for it shows Mitchell's aspirations to true belonging. The Yankee wants to find "a good Irish girl" for a domestic, but Scarlett answers, "you'll find no Irish servants in Atlanta....I've never seen a white servant and I shouldn't care to have one in my house."²⁷ Obviously, for the northerner, the Irish are not yet white. I doubt that they were in the South, either, but Mitchell wills them to be so in her selective and occasionally self-serving version of history, a world where Father Ryan, who indeed had connections to the Irish nexus in Georgia, "never fail[s] to call when passing through."²⁸

A complete discussion of Mitchell's appropriation of Irishness could fill the better part of a study. Suffice it to say that Mitchell could have it both ways during her life, if she desired, by claiming a Protestant ancestor now and again. Yet she did not take the easy out, and asserted her Irishness with considerable finality: it is Irishness, the "tragic" part of her identity, that ensures her survival, whereas in tales of passing, the outed character usually perishes. Similarly, fits of Irish pique frequently interfere with the coolness of an aspiring southern lady—coolness being an Anglo-desideratum, as one sees in stories of African-

Americans who must “control” their “nature”—but this is also what gives her an edge. It is also this split personality that has made her a well-loved character.

And Mitchell was, in real life, a genuine southern lady. Unfortunately, the success of *Gone with the Wind* dominated the rest of her life and betokened considerable personal unhappiness, taxing the charity of a reclusive woman. She spent the twelve years before her death “cleaning up after *GWTW*,” as she put it, engaging in charity work, settling her foreign royalties, and salvaging what remained of her privacy. At one point she employed a small army of full-time writers in an attempt to graciously answer *all* of her fan mail. Margaret Mitchell wrote out of a need to claim her full status within southern society, at once rejecting it and seeking its approval, challenging its stratified gender roles (she had a lifelong phobia about pregnancy, for example) while conforming to expectations of feminine decorum. If, as I have argued, her novel failed in its critique, it succeeded more than any other in carving out equal status for southern Irish.

She was always tough-minded and contradictory—not unlike her most famous character. Like all stereotypes, the “Steel Magnolia” type that Mitchell coined contained a kernel of reality. So, too, did Flannery O’Connor’s characters, whose familiar qualities were simply grotesquely magnified. O’Connor’s family history in many respects paralleled Margaret Mitchell’s, but her fiction took a much different turn. In a textbook illustration of the anxiety of influence, Flannery O’Connor worried about being run over by the Faulkner Express. Now a generation of southern writers lives in awe of crossing the Milledgeville Giantess. A sea of ink has been spilled in the interpretation of her work. To this ocean I have very little to add just now.

Rather, I would like to offer a few observations about the way that she identified herself. A number of critics have suggested that any vestigial trappings of Irish identity meant very little to her—although she, like Margaret Mitchell, could have “put on the dog” and touted the middle respectability of her Irish ancestors. She did acknowledge pride in her ancestry, but it was of a more generically southern character. And since her sense of Irish ethnicity was faded, she located her identity in its Catholic remnant and in her southernness. For all her intellectualism, her Catholicism was bred to the bone and largely unconscious. Perhaps its Irish roots showed partly in the tonic of self-criticism. For example, she wrote to a friend that she did not care to “wash” in Lourdes on account of lack of privacy, and then automatically added, “This is neither right nor holy of me but it is what it is.”²⁹

Ever the iconoclast, O'Connor was irritated by those people (“like [Wallace] Stegner”) who claimed that southern writers should leave the South. “I stayed away from the time I was 20 until I was 25 with the notion that the life of my writing depended on my staying away,” she wrote to a friend. “I would certainly have persisted in that delusion had I not got very ill and had to come home. The best of my writing has been done here.”³⁰ But when she was away from home, she laid on the southern part of her identity rather thickly at times. Paul Engle liked to recollect how he thought she was retarded because her accent was so gluey.³¹ She enjoyed scandalizing non-southerners with her homespun tales of the grotesque and reported with pride that she had been mentioned, along with Paul Bowles, as a contender within the “School of the Gratuitous Grotesque.”³² She signed one of her letters with “love from the dear old dirty Southland,” an apt substitution for the usual “Dublin.”

Despite the downplaying of her Irish identity, she was familiar with the trappings of Irish ethnicity. During her European pilgrimage she joked of going to “Baloney Castle,” and

she teased Father James H. McCown about a priest in Milledgeville, also Irish, who “orders green carnations for the altar” on St. Patrick’s day and whose favorite interjection was “as the Irishman said.”³³ She reported to Betty Hester that her “opinion of the Irish [had] gone up” after meeting a UN delegate. Her admiration vaulted when she determined that “she seem[ed] anti-clerical but not particularly anti-religious.” She clucked at the Irish chiefly for their humorless, Jansenistic strain of Catholicism and what she called its “slide-rule” mentality.

The issue of Irishness did not tend to arise in interviews, but Catholicism did. “People are always asking me if I am a Catholic writer,” she wrote John Hawkes, “and I am afraid that I sometimes say no and sometimes say yes, depending entirely on who the visitor is.”³⁴ Walker Percy thought this was all a bit coy. When he called Flannery O’Connor a Georgia fundamentalist (with an unspoken “shoo!” prefacing the statement), he was more correct about her politics than her faith (which absorbed elements of conservative Protestantism but remained unquestionably Catholic). She was indeed a fundamentalist, conservative to the core, not uncritical of her Church, but a staunch adherent. For Percy, a Catholic convert, the conservative core of his *chosen* religion might not have been immediately obvious to him—the neat and pre-existing agreement as between fundamentalism and Catholicism—nor would he have given much thought to the southern-fried variants of Catholicism that O’Connor ingested as she grew up.

Her unsparing southern visions always passed through her Catholicism first. The Georgian was well aware of fundamentalism and its temptations. What she termed the “do-it-yourself religion” of the South introduced the errors of Protestant zealots, which she found “painful and touching and grimly comic.” “It’s full of unconscious pride that lends them in

all sorts of ridiculous religious predicaments. They have nothing to correct their practical heresies and so they work them out dramatically. If this were merely comic to me,” she concluded, with humility, “it would be no good, but I accept the fundamental doctrines of sin and redemption that they do.” And for her, there was only hot or cold: “I can’t allow any of my characters, in a novel anyway, to stop in a halfway position. This doubtless comes of a Catholic education and a Catholic sense of history—everything works toward its true end or away from it, and everything is ultimately either saved or lost.”³⁵ O’Connor’s Aquinine (and Aristotelian) reasoning was radically fundamental and doctrinally Catholic. She had a *southern* faith, too; perhaps she was indeed the first southern fundamentalist hellfire Catholic.

If Hell indeed awaits the suicide, then John Kennedy Toole (*A Confederacy of Dunces*), Clarence Cason (*90° in the Shade*), and Wilbur Cash (*The Mind of the South*) may have established a chummy, unairconditioned Southern literary circle there. Each of the three writers contributed single and singular works to the Southern canon. All three of them were Southern intellectuals from respectable families who taught in colleges where they were long remembered as skillful raconteurs and mild-mannered iconoclasts. All three became canonical sons of the South only after being disinherited. They felt keenly the exactions of what Cash called “the savage ideal,” that special conformity expected among Southerners. Strange to say, in the case of Toole and Cash, you can follow their affinities to the bitter end, since both seem to have come unhinged when abroad from mama South. One could argue that Toole’s military stint in Puerto Rico was the kiss of death for his *compis mentis*, eventually leading to a paranoid belief that “enemies” and conspirators were dogging him.

Boys from Brazil notwithstanding, Cash fell under the implausible certainty that he was being pursued by Nazi agents in Mexico City.

A strange consonance, to be sure, but then again, there is a curious way in which some events seem to exert a centripetal force on the very themes of human existence, surfacing and resurfacing around certain people. In some ways, suicide has been a problem for Southerners every since Edmund Ruffin fired the first shot of the Civil War and later his own (to borrow a Percyian turn of phrase) sunset cannon. Indeed, suicide was the strange attractor of Walker Percy's life, and it seems altogether fitting that he would have found a publishing outlet for a great knee-slapper.

Real life characters like Mrs. Toole are a reminder that fiction is almost redundant in New Orleans. To Southern eyes, early conditioned to pick up on "characters," John Kennedy Toole is indeed an identifiable type: a scrupulously self-contained man, almost dandyish in his public mode, a dryly hilarious curmudgeon in less guarded moments. The mother of this over-socialized type is equally recognizable as the suffocating, manipulative, long-suffering Southern mother who makes a long-suffering faithful mama's boy of her son. Mary Toole was the Catholic mother writ large. She presented her son with the challenge of loving an impossible woman. She may also have imposed an additional guilt-burden on a man already much given to blaming himself. Her son's best defense was a deflating sense of humor.

Ken Toole, as he was known to his friends, "was a Christmas-and-Easter churchgoer," according to his biographers. But he also had more than a layman's understanding of his faith. As Lord Acton has observed, "Exile is the cradle of nationalism," and the anti-Catholic views that greeted him during his teaching stint at Hunter College in New York activated a defensiveness that might otherwise have remained latent. Pressing the

point with his students only chilled the atmosphere in the classroom. Toole's Old World Catholicism and its traditional core did not translate into easy acceptance and there is much of his own experience in Ignatius Reilly's misbegotten attempts to connect with students.

He was a great distance from home. Ken Toole called himself a "southernist," and at least one friend described him as a "ferocious defender of the South."³⁶ He kept company with committed liberal activists, but was uncomfortable with the confrontational side of the civil rights movement. Like so many of the writers in this study, he was a conservative progressive who believed that "the south should handle its own problems."³⁷ A blend of the conservative and liberal, he was ecstatic when John F. Kennedy was elected, and shared in the elation of Irish Catholics across the country.

John Kennedy Toole was a one-book writer, for all purposes; *The Neon Bible* (1989) is autobiographically interesting but unquestionably juvenilia. *A Confederacy of Dunces* (1980) is a masterwork of the satiric form that had long been missing in southern Irish literature. The book bears witness to his somewhat bookish appreciation for the intellectual history of the religion. Toole shows himself adept at sending up all aspects of Catholicism, from false piety to hagiography, both of which come together bathetically when Ignatius announces, "I am going to pray to St. Martin de Porres, the patron saint of mulattoes, for our cause in the factory ["The Campaign for Moorish Dignity"]. Because he is also invoked against rats, he will perhaps aid us in the office, too."³⁸

Toole is able to send up the disapproving spirit of Father Abram Ryan by reincarnating him in Ignatius Reilly, who grouses, "I do not support the current Pope. He does not at all fit my concept of a good, authoritarian Pope. Actually, I am opposed to the relativism of modern Catholicism quite violently."³⁹ Occasionally, elements of Toole's Irish

background shine through his one-of-a-kind character. The Reilly residence bears a bit of this handiwork: "Near the dead tree [by the porch] was a slight mound of earth and a leaning Celtic cross cut from plywood."⁴⁰ This pitiable talisman of ethnic identity is not the only one. Mrs. Reilly keeps her small savings "in the Hibernia bank." Ignatius records in his journal his efforts to show solidarity with the workers he champions by dancing with them: "[H]aving spent countless hours of my life watching those blighted children on television dancing to this sort of music, I knew the physical spasm which it was supposed to elicit, and I attempted my own conservative version of the same on the spot to further pacify the workers. I must admit that my body moved with surprising agility; I am not without an innate sense of rhythm; my ancestors must have been rather outstanding at jigging on the heath."⁴¹ It is characteristic of Irish parody that the satirist at some point takes aim at himself. Irish American literature began in satire, and Toole's return to the genre—along with Flannery O'Connor and E.P. O'Donnell—marked a needed return to an old tradition.

The success of *A Confederacy of Dunces* occluded the reputation of Toole's kindred spirit and predecessor, E. P. O'Donnell (1895-1943). O'Donnell was also from New Orleans, the scion of "Galway O'Donnells" and "Country Clare O'Briens."⁴² O'Donnell was an omnivorous reader who dropped out of school following the fourth grade. Sherwood Anderson was sufficiently impressed by his narrative panache after chancing to discover him conducting a Ford plant tour that he advised O'Donnell to become a writer. To the astonishment of everyone, he did, selling his first short story at age thirty-six. After placing stories in *Harper's* and *Collier's*, he won a Houghton Mifflin literary fellowship. With the winnings he bought a "one room shack at Boothville, 90 miles south of New Orleans where he wrote and raised Easter lilies and oranges."⁴³ At this unlikely Walden he penned *Green*

Margins (1936), an elegiac book that followed the fortunes of the Slovenian family Kalavich. O'Donnell had an unfeigned affinity with these stragglers at the verdant edges of America's forgotten subcontinent. With his ear for dialect, his love of commonplace beauty, and "Latin" varieties of Catholicism, he at times seems to be the very reincarnation of Lafcadio Hearn, who loved to visit the same area.

He completed a second novel before dying, which garnered an appreciative afterword by Eudora Welty when it was reissued in 1979. The dialogue of *Great Big Doorstep* (1941) reads seamlessly beside Toole's; the pages salute the full span of New Orleans dialect. O'Donnell pokes harmless fun at all comers, including Irish catholic religious such as Sister Margaret, who declares of her new environs, "Sure a wonderful country," until she catches a whiff of freshly-skinned muskrats, discarded by neighbors. When this is explained to her, she replies "And hasn't the trapping season been over a long time?" Of course, the season has long since closed, and Sister Margaret asks incredulously, "Are these people Catholics?"⁴⁴

Later, one Mr. Crochet relates the troubles of his world: "I've got some kids myself. I wish they were country-raised. One son dove in shallow water the other day. My youngest daughter smokes cigars and paints pictures in the abattoir. She went to Washington and got locked in the Corcoran Gallery. When they came in the morning, she had to be taken to the hospital in hysterics. We've all got our troubles."⁴⁵

It is an infectiously funny book that barely seems to contain its characters, who cackle with a raucous Louisiana accent, and it seems at least likely that Toole used it as a source. Identical eye dialect turns up in both books, and the personalities are equally inimitable. *Doorstep's* half-baked Catholic sensibility, on top of its other graces, comes as a *lagniappe*;

for example, when a Cajun mother explains a peccadillo to her daughter, “Not to God it ain’t no sin.... You think God’s got time to humbug will little ole transgressments like that?” (She also advises, “Never tell people your business. Jesus never tole nobody His business.”) ⁴⁶ Beneath it all is the unmistakable *joie de vivre* that defies the poverty of the place—one chapter is titled “We Got No Troubles A Dollar Won’t Cure”—and it was this quality that endeared the comedy to Eudora Welty.

But I turn now to a name that evokes great seriousness. Cormac McCarthy was originally called Charles, after his father, who was a Yankee transplant. Like Abram Ryan, he was named exactly as his father at birth. At some point the younger McCarthy was renamed. Precisely how and when remains unclear, like so many other details of his life. One story goes that he renamed himself Cormac after the Irish Cormac McCarthy who built Blarney Castle; the other is that the family changed his name to the Irish variation, which means “son of Charles.” As southern literature aficionados will appreciate, who does the naming is important. In any event, the modification signaled a firm awareness of Irish roots. In 1965 McCarthy used funds from a traveling fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters to board the liner *Sylvania*; he was intent on journeying to Ireland to investigate his family’s Irish past. (He met his second wife en route.) The reclusive writer has proven himself a sensitive observer of the Irish origins of southern culture in the upper South, particularly in his Appalachian works.

As the third of six children in an Irish Catholic family, McCarthy attended a Catholic high school in Knoxville but the extent and character of his Catholicity has occasioned considerable critical complexity. *Blood Meridian* (1985) is a case study, in that regard. As Farrell O’Gorman has observed, “The horrific violence in Cormac McCarthy’s Gothic

Western *Blood Meridian* is inseparable from—and affectively heightened by—the novel’s dense religious imagery.”⁴⁷ The landscape is littered with bodies—and Catholic icons: saints in their niches vandalized by American troops, slain Mexicans “pooled in their communal blood [alongside] a dead Christ in a glass bier [which] lay broken on the chancel floor,” and elsewhere, bodies “tonsured to the bone...like maimed and naked monks.”⁴⁸ Indeed, as O’Gorman shrewdly observes, Mexico itself is likened to “a great stained altarstone,” red with “the blood of a thousand Christs.”⁴⁹

McCarthy has a reputation for writing gruesome scenes with such tender attention that they somehow seduce the reader by their paradoxically repellent beauty. He uses sacramental language to describe the rites of violence, but, unlike Flannery O’Connor, he denies the reader the satisfaction of sacramental transformation. The book abounds in failed sacraments, as O’Gorman points out, and in the face of such horror, it demands some sort of interpretive framework.

Leo Daugherty has suggested that *Blood Meridian* sets up a Gnostic Tragedy in which creation is actually hell, and the chillingly evil Judge is a Gnostic archon, or demonic demigod, straight from the beliefs of the Manichean Gnostic heretics.⁵⁰ This palliates the book’s sting somewhat, since it offers not a hint of redemption among its grotesque band of bloodthirsty rogues that die as senselessly as they live. How could any remotely orthodox Catholic create such a bleak world? And do we need recourse to an ancient heresy to understand it?

Both Daugherty and O’Gorman offer brilliant insights to the novel, but I part company with them in one respect. When McCarthy suggests in the border trilogy that evil is still a familiar presence in Mexico and that it walks the land, he expounds a tenet that is

quite consistent with Catholic belief: we live in a fallen world, and evil rules the day. Sin is the ordinary state of things. One wonders if there is a fragment of ancient Irish belief in all this, especially the Irish belief that “powers” may move through people. Perhaps McCarthy wants to shake us out of our complaisance, since we live in a society that habitually attributes evil to something or someone else: insanity, terrorists, a third grade teacher, etc. All men, women, animals, are created equal in McCarthy’s nightmare of a world, and they suffer the pains of death equally regardless of whether they led decent or corrupt lives.

I think that McCarthy is most Catholic in this respect: what frightens him more than anything else is the thought that we might live in the world of *Blood Meridian*. Cormac McCarthy repeatedly committed, in print, what for an Irish Catholic may be the greatest, perhaps even satanic, rebellion: the principled examination of agnosticism. (Twain’s “Forty-Four,” the satanic character of *The Mysterious Stranger*, seduces people and readers alike to entertain this heresy; he is very like McCarthy’s Judge.) Gnostics believe that the Christ of a cross was a phantasm, and that only a chosen few have access to the secret knowledge of salvation. Nothing could be more terrifying to a Catholic who has failed hard at believing.

There is no rebellion without realizing the substance of order. In his “southern” subject matter, McCarthy demonstrates a keen awareness of the decrees of his native culture that we have seen in other southern Irish writers—the nuances, the accents, and the eccentricities. *Child of God* (1973) shows in almost allegorical terms how easily a questioner becomes a pariah. The terror of McCarthy’s violent universe is that the orthodox presumptions predicated it could be wrong: we inhabit a world truly gone out of order, where we cannot connect with a savior.

For that reason alone O’Gorman interprets the world of *Blood Meridian* as an alternate universe. This has long been a sticking point for Catholic criticism. In “The Catholic Novelist in the South,” Flannery O’Connor opined:

The American Catholic trusts the fictional imagination about as little as he trusts anything. Before it’s well on its feet, he’s busy looking for heresy in it. The Catholic press is constantly broken out in a rash of articles on the failure of the Catholic novelist. **The Catholic novelist is failing to reflect the virtue of hope, failing to show the Church’s interest in social justice, failing to show life as a positive good, failing to portray our belief in a light that will make them desirable to others. He occasionally writes well, but he always writes wrong. Now if in the next twenty years we find ourselves with a batch of wild Southern Catholic writers who fail in all these things and, in addition, have certain positive obnoxious qualities—such as a penchant for violence and grotesquery and religious enthusiasm—we are doubtless going to wonder how these strange birds got hatched in our nest [emphasis added].**⁵¹

It appears that McCarthy is just such a hatchling. And yet O’Gorman quite rightly acknowledges that *Blood Meridian* is somehow Catholic. He writes, “Americans in *Blood Meridian* encounter in Mexico much what they do aboard the ship *San Dominick* in *Benito Cereno*: an ancient ‘Catholic’ world of suffering, moral ambiguity, and literal or figurative miscegenation where their own previous certitudes are dispelled in a maelstrom of violence.”⁵² McCarthy dispatches the swashbuckling *gringo* Protestants on their crusade of Manifest Destiny with barely suppressed delight, as if to say, welcome to the mystery of suffering, which is of very ancient issue. The fiendish mercenaries are the architects of the hell at the center of the writer’s brooding vision. *Blood Meridian* reflects McCarthy’s sense of a Catholic alternative to Protestant symbolism, and is predictably very corporeal, very mysterious, and very absolute. It has also been observed that a Catholic education classically conceives of history as a struggle not merely between good and evil, but between Catholic

and non-Catholic forces. In closing this brief, I would pose what I think is the relevant question: Is McCarthy embracing his otherness or exorcising it?

McCarthy is already being consigned to canonical fame by academics who admire him—whether he likes it or not. His writing is richly allusive, technically sophisticated, and certainly the “high” art that literary scholars smile upon. But many of the best-known southern Irish writers of the twentieth century might stand accused of writing middlebrow literature. Such a designation is probably unfair to Pat Conroy, whose sense of verisimilitude has endeared him to both southern and national readers alike. His subdued sense of alienation has produced some fairly penetrating observations about the peculiarities of southern culture. Anne Rice, born Howard Allen O’Brien, received a Catholic education as she grew up in a “big Irish Catholic family” in New Orleans. The protagonist of *Exit to Eden* (1985) is a toothsome Irish Catholic woman named Lisa Kelly who embarks to the Carribean where she indulges herself in activities that elude polite description. One can only ask what it was about her childhood that compelled her to take southern Gothic first into more continental, and then sordid avenues; was it the disaffection of her faith? Or the fact that she was named Howard? Her gothic preoccupations are ultimately not so very different from the strange world of Lafcadio Hearn—the main difference being that Hearn never dallied in pornography.

Ethnic literature never achieved the same resonance in the South as in other parts of the country—with some exceptions, of course—but these popular writers were able to draw on familiar themes of ethnic otherness to make their work exportable well beyond a regional audience. To this day, southern literature mostly evokes the names of white writers, and bookstores, who must account to popular taste and perception, will rarely class an African

American writer from the South with the Southern Writers; they are to be found instead in the African American section. Books with overtly ethnic themes are not the first thing that “southern lit” connotes. For most of the country, the mention of a “good Irish kid” instantly meant something; for southerners, it meant rather less.

Nevertheless, Louis Rubin, who is largely responsible for shaping the study of southern literature into a distinct practice of American literary study, regards two novels written by a southern Irish woman as among the most underappreciated novels that he helped see into print. A Charleston Jew, Rubin comes from a major southern city that is unusually ethnic, and from a generation predisposed to seeing American life in ethnic terms. That ethnic view was arguably hastened by a world war that heightened awareness of American diversity; sports, and sportswriting, also facilitated acculturation. As a young man in the newsroom, Rubin was well positioned to feel both influences.

Margaret Skinner was also born into ethnic self-awareness in Memphis by virtue of an Irish enclave familiar to many Memphians but mostly unnoticed by outsiders. A sizable Irish community developed at the city, which lies at the approximate halfway point on the New Orleans/St. Louis immigration pathway. Irish have played a sometimes-inglorious part in Memphis’s long and troubled history of race relations; this is true in other places where they abutted black communities. Skinner’s familiar territory is the Irish neighborhood known as “the Pinch” (not very different from *the Patch* in Saint Louis) and the black neighborhoods nearer Beale Street, and she deftly brings together the ever-connected worlds of Irish southerners and African Americans. She is something of a late bloomer; she did not begin writing until her 40’s, in part, because she esteemed writers so highly. By steeling

herself to the pen she modestly created the most explicitly southern Irish literature since *Gone with the Wind*.

Skinner's boisterous first novel, *Old Jim Canaan* (1990) abounds with a distinctly Irish joie de vivre and seems to erupt with the sounds of fisticuffs and speakeasy raillery. It traces the saga of the Canaan family and their ties with the criminal underworld in Memphis, offering a kaleidoscopic view of Memphis history, from the Yellow Fever epidemic of 1878 to Prohibition. Her second novel, *Molly Flanagan and the Holy Ghost* (1995) is a southern coming-of-age story of the mid-1950's, also set in Memphis, but full of the ordinary moral and theological perplexities of a Catholic adolescence. Molly suffers from a strabismus that endows her with split vision, literally and figuratively, as she attempts to negotiate between Protestant and Catholic claims on her worldview.

Skinner taps a rich vein of family lore in both books, which brim with authentic understanding of southern Irish folkways. And she knows her subject. We meet a pettifogger named "Merlin Mahon," born 1875, whose skills include the ability to dodge bullets without spilling whiskey. Merlin indirectly shows the authenticity of Skinner's history; it was the right time to be named "Merlin," because Father Ryan's poem had popularized the name among southern Irish.⁵³ Where else might one find the "odors of bourbon and cabbage" mingling on the same page as colcannon and the "Dies Irae"?⁵⁴ Or sins "covered with butter and drowned in molasses"?⁵⁵ Or a family feud where "Byrd, the dutiful godmother, filled Molly with the great drama and mystery of Catholicism; Grandmother Willie worked prodigiously to save her from the same Roman Church, a thing so bedeviled and foreign it was governed by an Italian posing as Christ on earth."⁵⁶ Skinner's work puts the Memphis southern Irish community in grand style, as she succeeds

in recapturing a vibrant family history with considerable imagination without distorting its historical grounding. The two novels spell out the immigration pathways, the customs imported directly from Ireland and their southern inflections, the quirks of speech, the frequent gallows humor, the godhead peculiar to Irish Catholicism—in short, they comprise a remarkably exhaustive fictional treatment, skillfully written. These under appreciated novels attest a subculture that offers a rich and varied creative store to southern writers—if only they look to it. They also show that the southern Irish have not been “written out,” and so cannot be written off.

* * *

European immigrants constituted only 15% of the immigrants admitted to the United States between 1991 and 1998. Within the rapidly changing ethnic landscape of modern immigration, southern Irish writers appear quaintly anachronistic, relics from a bygone time. Most Irish immigrants to the South assimilated and “disappeared” over the span of generations; they are more likely to think of themselves as ethnically southern than Irish. The channels of Irish immigration have dried up. Furthermore, as the South becomes more Asian, more Hispanic, more African and Middle Eastern, one might anticipate new hybrids of southern identity as a similarly keen-eyed class of writers emerge and begin anew the work of reinterpreting the South.

The arrival of new immigrants falls at a time when scholars are reevaluating southern boundaries and expanding them to other colonial points South. There are good historical and cultural reasons for this, and in the expanded South the Irish again make cameos. The ill-

fated San Patricios, a band of disenchanted Irish Americans who defected to the Mexican Army, discovered a different South to fight and die for, a South steeped in Catholic tradition and subjected to familiar foreign domination. As the character John O'Reilly declares in *Los colorados del San Patricio* (339), “¡Malditos gringos, están por todas partes! (Damn gringos, they're everywhere!)”⁵⁷

This was the territory to which Cormac McCarthy decamped in his border trilogy, taking the border of southern literature with him. By crossing into Mexico, he sought out his deep Catholic roots, the untamed spirit of the southern frontier, and the Other that gives the lie to American civilization. Lafcadio Hearn led the exodus to postcolonial territory, and McCarthy's recent work is an intriguing step in this direction. But now, postmodern critics say, the whole concept of the border is *déclassé*. And where does that leave McCarthy and his band of wild men, and their packs of wolves?

Concurrently, the meaning of Catholic faith has been transformed. The South remains demonstrably more conventionally religious than other parts of the country, and has proven remarkably resistant to trends of the secular. But the “lapsed” Catholic culture that prevails in the United States raises a difficult question: will Catholic writing matter so much? Percy and O'Connor brought fresh Catholic relevance to the postmodern era. It remains to be seen if they will have southern heirs.

The problem here is not just one of southern Catholicism but of southern literature generally. Fred Hobson has pointed out that southern literature seems to have reached an uneasy lull of late. In that respect, so-called grit lit and Kmart chic may have tapped out a last reserve. A spiritual crisis that has long been in progress—Walker Percy and Flannery

O'Connor marked it well—used to stoke the creative faculties of southern writers. Now, it seems, even the crisis has grown stale and uninspiring.

But the South is a land of many reverses, and who knows, but that some son or daughter of Irish wit might come out of the blue, and sing to her soul once again?

Notes

- ¹ Mariann Martin, "Margaret Skinner Reads at Annual Creative Writing Workshop," Union (University) News and Information April 8 2004.
- ² Kate Chopin, Complete Novels and Stories (New York: Library of America : Distributed to the trade in the U.S. by Penguin Putnam, 2002) 772.
- ³ Kate Chopin, The Awakening (Chicago, New York,: H. S. Stone & company, 1899) 34.
- ⁴ Toth, Kate Chopin 75.
- ⁵ Kate Chopin, Emily Toth, Per Seyersted, Cheyenne Bonnell and NetLibrary Inc., Kate Chopin's Private Papers (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1998) 59.
- ⁶ "The Shape of the Head." In Chopin, Toth, Seyersted, Bonnell and NetLibrary Inc., Kate Chopin's Private Papers 229-32.
- ⁷ William Peterfield Trent, The Cambridge History of American Literature (New York: Macmillan, 1946) 390.
- ⁸ "Hocus pocus" comes from a mocking corruption of the most important words of the mass: *Hic est corpus*.
- ⁹ Toth, Kate Chopin 122.
- ¹⁰ Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, "Kate Chopin: A Re-Awakening. Interview," (1999), vol. Available: <http://www.pbs.org/katechopin/interviews.html>
- ¹¹ David Chopin, Interview, 1999, Available: <http://www.pbs.org/katechopin/interviews.html>.
- ¹² Cf., Linda Wagner-Martin, The Modern American Novel, 1914-1945 : A Critical History, Twayne's Critical History of the Novel (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990), Marianne DeKoven, "Gendered Doubleness and the "Origins" of Modernist Form," Tulsa Studies in Women's Literature 8.1, Toward a Gendered Modernity (1989): 694, Linda Wagner-Martin, American Modern : Essays in Fiction and Poetry, National University Publications (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1980), Linda Wagner-Martin, The Mid-Century American Novel, 1935-1965, Twayne's Critical History of the Novel (New York: Twayne, 1997).
- ¹³ Cf., Janice A. Radway, A Feeling for Books : The Book-of-the-Month Club, Literary Taste, and Middle-Class Desire (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1997). And Joan Shelley Rubin, The Making of Middlebrow Culture (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).

- ¹⁴ Drew Gilpin Faust, "Clutching the Chains That Bind: Margaret Mitchell and *Gone with the Wind*," Southern Cultures 5.1 (1999), Patricia Yaeger, "Race and the Cloud of Unknowing in *Gone with the Wind*," Southern Cultures 5.1.
- ¹⁵ Anne Goodwyn Jones, Tomorrow Is Another Day : The Woman Writer in the South, 1859-1936 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1981).
- ¹⁶ Elizabeth I. Hanson, Margaret Mitchell, Twayne's United States Authors Series (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1990) 78, 81.
- ¹⁷ "How Black was Rhett Bulter?" in Numan V. Bartley, The Evolution of Southern Culture (Athens, Ga.: University of Georgia Press, 1988). See also Ben Railton, "'What Else Could a Southern Gentleman Do?': Quentin Compson, Rhett Butler, and Miscegenation," Southern Literary Journal 35.2 (2003).
- ¹⁸ Erik Bledsoe, "Margaret Mitchell's Review of *Soldier's Pay*," Mississippi Quarterly 49.3 (1996).
- ¹⁹ Darden Asbury Pyron, Recasting : *Gone with the Wind* in American Culture (Miami: University Presses of Florida, 1983) 123.
- ²⁰ Pyron, Southern Daughter : The Life of Margaret Mitchell 244.
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